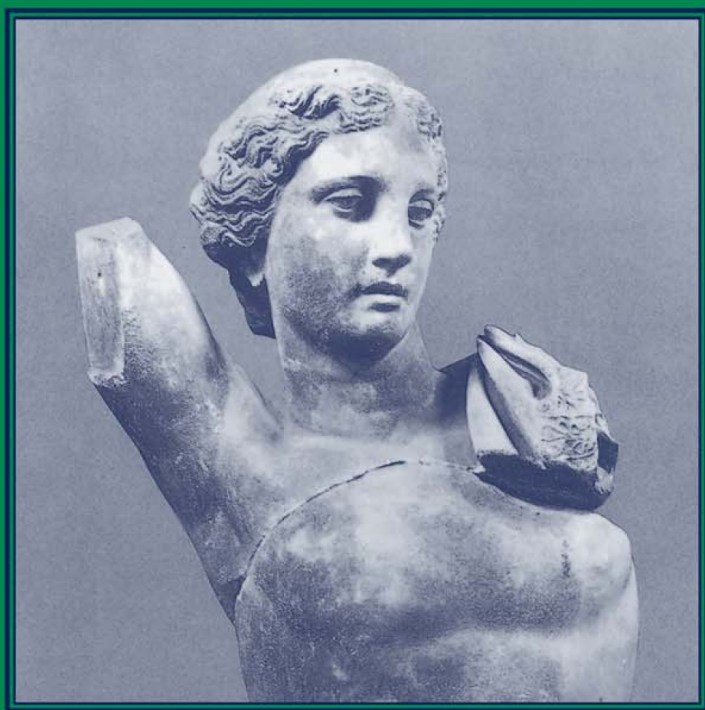


Cicero

THE NATURE
OF THE GODS

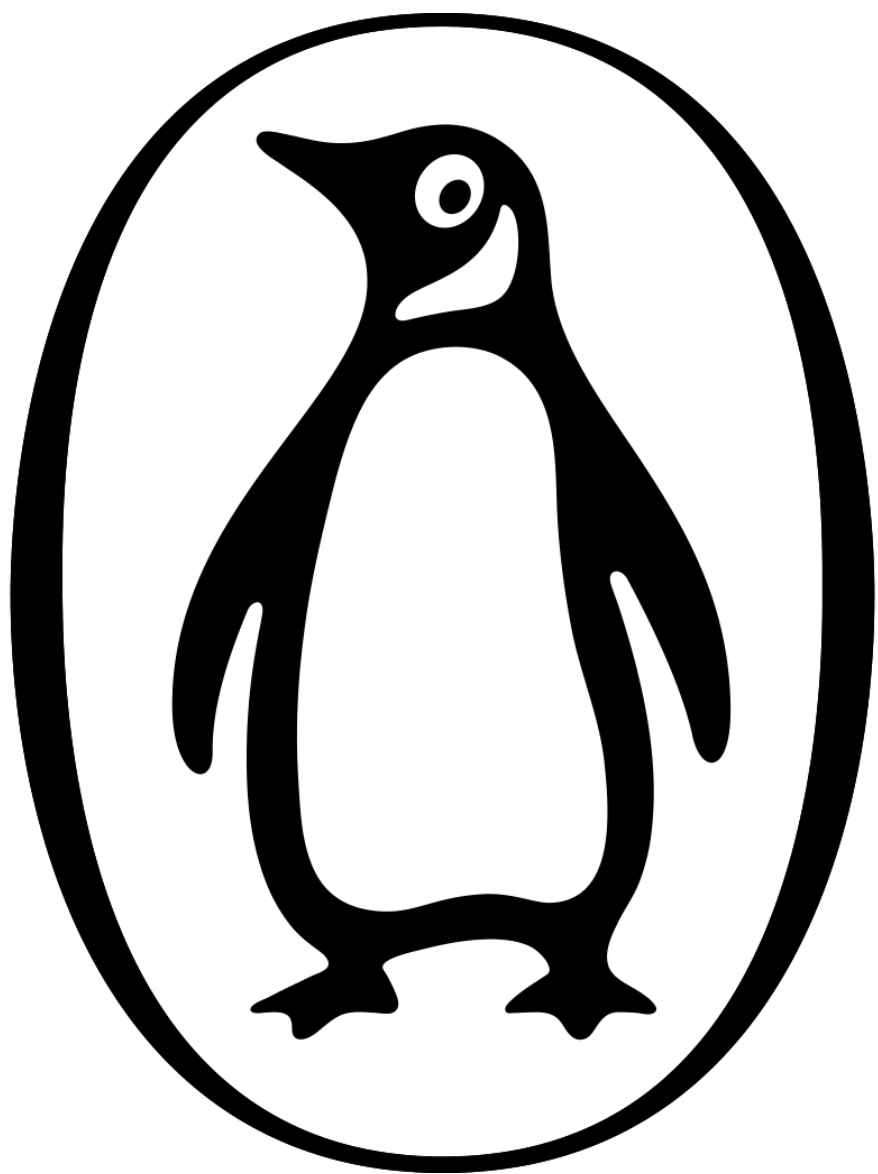


*Translated with introduction and
explanatory notes by*

P. G. WALSH

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THE NATURE OF THE GODS

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO (106–43 BC), Roman orator and statesman, was born at Arpinum of a wealthy local family. He was taken to Rome for his education with the idea of a public career and by 70 BC he had established himself as the leading barrister in Rome. In the meantime his political career was well under way and he was elected praetor for the year 66. His ambitious nature enabled him to obtain those honours which could normally only have been conferred upon members of the Roman aristocracy and he was duly elected consul for 63. One of the most permanent features of his political life was his attachment to Pompey. As a politician his greatest failing was his consistent refusal to compromise, as a statesman his ideals were more honourable and unselfish than those of his contemporaries. Cicero was the greatest of the Roman orators, possessing a wide range of techniques and an exceptional command of the Latin tongue. He followed the common practice of publishing his speeches. The information that they give us about contemporary social and political life is greatly increased by his letters, of which we have 900, published posthumously. His deeper thoughts are revealed by a considerable number of writings on moral and political philosophy, on religion and on the theory and practice of rhetoric.

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CICERO

THE NATURE OF THE GODS

Translated by Horace C. P. McGregor

*with an introduction by
J. M. Ross*

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INTRODUCTION*

by J. M. Ross

The Nature of the Gods is a puzzling yet fascinating work. Anyone coming to it fresh from our modern world is likely to find it a strange mixture of sense and nonsense, wisdom and puerility, acute reasoning and palpable fallacies. But it will never yield its fruits to us if we read it as a timeless distillation of perennial philosophy: it takes its character from the personality of its remarkable author, from the particular point in his life at which it was written and from the particular stage to which Greek thought had developed in the middle of the first century B.C. To help the reader to get the most out of this treasury of ancient argumentation, this Introduction deals with the following four topics:

- (1) who Cicero was and why he wrote this book;
- (2) *The Nature of the Gods* itself;
- (3) the rival philosophies expounded in it; and
- (4) its value in subsequent ages and at the present day.

Much has already been written on them, and material for further study will be found in the bibliography at the end of this book.

1

CICERO

Cicero has gone down to fame as an orator skilled in the art of invective; a well-meaning but not very successful politician; the author of some execrable verse; and the writer of some rather attractive, self-revealing letters. One does not expect such a man to have anything of value to contribute in the fields of philosophy and theology. But the truth about Cicero is rather different, as a brief survey of his life will show.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in 106 B.C. at Arpinum, sixty miles south-east of Rome, on his well-to-do father's country estate. His father was a studious semi-invalid who took great pains over the education of his two sons, Marcus and Quintus, and took a house in Rome in order to fit them for a public career. To qualify for public office in Rome it was essential to be trained in the law, and in his later teens Cicero became a pupil of Scaevola, one of the greatest

constitutional lawyers of the day. In addition to law Cicero studied rhetoric (the art not only of public speaking but of presentation of an argument) and philosophy. In philosophy he had the good fortune to study, in his formative years, under gifted exponents of each of the three main contemporary schools of thought. First he studied Epicureanism under Phaedrus, and gave his assent to his teaching, influenced no doubt by the sweetness and charm of his character. In 88, however, Cicero found a new master. Philo, the leading exponent of the philosophy known as the Academy, arrived in Rome as a political refugee from Athens; Cicero lost no time in taking instruction from so distinguished a teacher, and was immediately converted to his school of thought. Never again did Cicero show anything but hostility to Epicureanism. (In this he may have been influenced by the fact that Epicurus advised his followers to withdraw from the turmoil of public affairs, whereas during the greater part of his life Cicero was ambitious to play a leading part in politics.) So enamoured was Cicero of Philo's teaching that for a time he resolved to devote himself entirely to philosophy, imagining that the civil war between Marius and Sulla had permanently extinguished the Roman legal system.* The teaching of Philo was decisive for Cicero's subsequent life, and its principles inspired and held together all his varied activities to the end of his days. In contrast to the dogmatic claims of Epicureans and Stoics to absolute truth, the Academy proceeded by sceptical examination of all positions in order to find which was most probable, and this was always Cicero's method, so that just as he opposed all absolutism in philosophy, so also he opposed all absolutism, real or threatened, in government, whether the threat came from Sulla, Catiline, Caesar or Antonius.

Cicero's philosophical education did not end with his studies under Philo, for in the following year the eminent Stoic teacher Diodotus became an inmate of his father's house and continued to live with the family until his death in Cicero's house at Rome in 59. Cicero never abandoned the Academy for Stoicism, but acquired a good knowledge of logic from Diodotus and found many features of Stoicism attractive. More will be said about these three philosophical systems in [section 3](#) below; here we are concerned only with the place of philosophy in Cicero's life: but on that there are three things that need to be made clear at this point. (1) Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-one Cicero had a very good philosophical education from the best Greek teachers, so that when he took to writing philosophical treatises in later life he did so with a trained and well-informed mind. (2) Throughout his life Cicero kept his interest in philosophy alive by constant reading and discussion. Even when in the thick of legal or political business he kept his studies going, so that whenever he found

time to write he had only to turn on the tap and out came a fully prepared treatise. (3) To Cicero, as an Academic, philosophy was not, as it was to Epicureans, a means of escape from life, but was an integral element in all his activities as lawyer, orator, writer and politician. Whether he was engaged in a legal contest, or writing to his friend Atticus about the next step in politics, or analysing some problem in philosophy, Cicero was about fundamentally the same business: setting out the rival solutions as clearly and sympathetically as possible, in order to arrive at a judgement as to where the truth most probably lay and where, in consequence, one should commit oneself in action.

In about 84 Cicero began to practise as an advocate. His first extant speech was delivered in 81 in defence of Roscius of Ameria, who was being prosecuted (for murdering his father) by a freedman of Sulla, the successful soldier who then dominated Rome. He won the case, and in 79 deemed it prudent to take a long holiday in Athens with his brother and cousin. According to his own account* he went abroad for the sake of his health: he had been overworking and had strained his voice. According to Plutarch† the real reason was that he was afraid of retaliation by Sulla because of his success in the Roscius case, though there was some truth in Cicero's pretext of ill-health. Probably Cicero was in no danger from Sulla, but we may well believe Plutarch, for as Cicero truly said about himself, 'I am cowardly not in facing dangers, but in guarding against them.'‡

At Athens Cicero resumed his philosophical studies and was greatly taken with Antiochus, who had claimed the headship of the Academy after Philo's death in 87; he judged him to be 'the most cultivated and shrewdest of all the philosophers of our time',§ though he did not approve of his attempt to combine the teaching of the Academic school with elements from Stoicism and Aristotelianism. During his stay at Athens Cicero was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, an experience with no modern parallel, though its emotional effect might have been analogous to that of baptism in a Pentecostal church today. This was not to Cicero a merely transient adventure, for some thirty years later he acknowledged that among all the wonders of Athens he had received nothing better than this initiation, which taught him the principles not only of joyful living but also of dying with a better hope.* This is worth bearing in mind as a corrective to the impression often given by his theological writings that to Cicero religion was a purely objective matter in which he was not personally involved. As will be seen, he had another vivid religious experience much later at the death of his daughter Tullia.

Plutarch tells us that after some time in Athens Cicero heard of Sulla's death, and being now recovered in health renewed his political

ambitions and went to Rhodes for advanced study in rhetoric under the renowned teacher Molo. While he was in Rhodes he came in contact with the aged Rutilius Rufus, an exiled Roman lawyer and strict Stoic, who made a deep impression on him. He also made further philosophical study there under Posidonius, whom he described afterwards as 'the greatest of the Stoics'.[†]

In 77 Cicero returned to Rome and resumed his legal practice. Exceptional both in intellectual capacity and in application to his profession, he soon became the leading advocate in the Forum, or, as we would say, at the bar. It is worth mentioning that according to Plutarch[‡] Cicero was as a young man regarded not only as the best Roman orator but also as the best Roman poet. This is not at all impossible. From the fragments of his verse which have survived we may well judge that Cicero, though no poetic genius, transformed the uncouthness of Ennius's style into a polished instrument ready for use by Catullus and Lucretius. It was his later poems extolling his political achievements that brought him into bad odour with the critics, but his careful attention to poetical as well as oratorical style was simply another expression of his philosophical conviction that everything must be presented in the clearest and most attractive manner in order that the nearest approximation to truth may in the end emerge. This no doubt explains the paradox that (if we may believe the tradition recorded by St Jerome) after Lucretius's suicide in 51 Cicero prepared for publication his great poem *On Nature (De Rerum Natura)*, although as is evident from [Book I](#) of *The Nature of the Gods* Cicero had no sympathy whatever with the Epicurean philosophy which the poem expounded.

Having established his position at the bar, Cicero began to apply for election, as soon as he was qualified by age, to the various posts on the official ladder (or *cursus honorum*). At thirty years of age, and ten years after performing his military service, he was eligible for appointment to the junior administrative office of quaestor, which gave automatic membership of the Senate. To this office Cicero was elected in 76 to serve the following year. The duties were allocated by lot, and Cicero, much to his annoyance, had to leave Rome for a year and live in Sicily supervising the shipment of corn to Rome. On his return he resumed his legal practice and by 70 felt ready to seek appointment as aedile; he came top of the poll, and held the office during the year 69. The aediles were responsible for city administration – policing, street maintenance, markets, etc. – and were expected to put on public shows and festivals, largely from their own resources. Unlike some others, Cicero did not spend extravagantly on such entertainments; he was not a rich man, and preferred to gain a good reputation by forensic skill and honest hard

work. (Just before serving his aedileship Cicero had successfully prosecuted Verres for maladministration as governor of Sicily; counsel for the defence had been Hortensius, previously regarded as the greatest orator of the day.) His prestige was now such that he could seek the next higher office of praetor; some praetors were sent abroad as governors of provinces, but Cicero became (in 66) First Praetor of Rome; the duties of this post were chiefly judicial. After his year as praetor Cicero aspired to the highest office of all – the consulship. Had he been of noble birth and fairly sure of sufficient influence to get him to the top, he might well have gone out as pro-praetor to govern a province, as many nobles did to recoup their lavish expenses as aedile; but Cicero came only from the second or ‘equestrian’ order in the state, and it was as difficult for a ‘new man’ from this class to become consul in Rome as it was for a commoner to become prime minister in eighteenth-century England. In neither case, however, was it impossible: Walpole became prime minister, Cicero became consul, but it meant staying in Rome and engaging in two years’ diligent canvassing. His reward came in 64, when having reached the minimum age of forty-two he stood for election with influential backing from nobles who would rather have a ‘new man’ as consul than Caesar’s candidates Antonius and Catiline. He was duly elected (together with a nonentity who was also backed by the nobles), and held office in the year 63. During the year he had to take summary action to crush a rebellion instigated by the disappointed Catiline; the rebellion, though dangerous, was ill-organized and badly led, and Cicero had little difficulty in nipping it in the bud. However, the Senate and people of Rome were wildly enthusiastic, hailing Cicero as ‘Father of the Fatherland’, and Cicero, in whom was a strong streak of vanity, had no difficulty in regarding his consulship as the greatest event in a hundred years of Roman history.

For the next few years he basked in the sunshine of his own and others’ adulation, unaware until too late that enemies were seeking his downfall. During his consulate he had, at the Senate’s request, put the leaders of the rebellion to death without trial. This seemed to Cicero quite proper at the time, just as he afterwards approved the assassination of Caesar, for they were manifest enemies of the state, and some of the greatest heroes of the past were those who made a violent end of tyrants such as Tarquinius Superbus. But it gave a handle to Cicero’s enemy Clodius, who as Caesar’s agent got a law passed in 59 making exile or death the penalty for anyone who should condemn or had already condemned a Roman citizen to death without a right of appeal to the vote of the people. Cicero took fright, and in March 58 fled to Greece. Next year he was permitted to return, but he never recaptured his former glory. By now the two principal figures in

the Roman world were Pompey and Caesar, and Cicero spent the rest of his political life wavering between the two. He really preferred Pompey, because he seemed to have less disregard (one could hardly say 'greater regard') for the forms and liberties of the Republic than had the ruthless Caesar. Actually neither of them valued Cicero's support nearly so highly as Cicero himself did. In 56 Cicero made his submission to Caesar. In 50 he attached himself again to Pompey in the civil war which had by then broken out, but after Pompey's defeat at Pharsalia in 48 Caesar invited him back to Rome, letting bygones be bygones.

Meanwhile in 53 Cicero had been appointed to the venerated office of augur, the duties of which consisted in the interpretation of omens and the foretelling of the future; in some ways the post was similar to that of astrologer to a European court five centuries ago, but it carried much greater prestige, and Cicero valued it accordingly, although privately he was very doubtful whether divination was of any value at all. In 51 he reluctantly obeyed the instruction of the Senate to spend a year as proconsul in charge of Cilicia. By the end of 46 he had retired altogether from politics, feeling that with Caesar as virtual dictator there was no public role for him to fill. In March 45 he began writing in earnest a series of philosophical books. He was not party to the assassination of Caesar on 15 March 44, but approved the deed; yet he did not return to active participation in politics but went on writing books, of which *The Nature of the Gods* was one. In the general chaos and civil warfare he felt there was nothing he could usefully do until in September of that year, realizing that the tyranny of Antony was even worse than Caesar's had been, he decided he must speak out, and attempt to save the state once again. Trusting in the support of Caesar's great-nephew Octavian (the future emperor Augustus), he returned to Rome and delivered a series of powerful speeches against Antony. Unfortunately for Cicero, Octavianus decided in November to ally himself with Antony. This left the senators helpless. Large numbers of Antony's enemies were 'proscribed', that is to say, publicly named as outlaws: their property was forfeited and they could be killed if found within Italy. Immediately Antony's agents set out in search of Cicero. They caught up with him at Formiae in December 43 as he was being carried in a litter to take ship. Cicero, realizing that his work was finished, offered his neck, and the centurion in charge dispatched him with his sword. Studious to the last, he was reading Euripides's *Medea* when the assassins found him

Yes, studious to the last; for the foregoing summary of Cicero's political career deals with only one aspect of his life. It is the aspect with which most biographies of Cicero are mainly or even exclusively concerned, and no doubt there is fascination and pathos in the story of

the ineffectual attempts of this high-principled but vain and irresolute lawyer to save the Republic from collapse before autocracy. But at bottom Cicero was not a politician but a scholar and philosopher. It would be going too far to say, with Reid,^{*} that Cicero ‘was really a man of books; by nothing but accident a politician’; he was a politician not by accident but by choice, his motives being a mixture of vanity, ambition and an earnest desire to do what he could for his country. Yet his heart was more in his studies than in his politics, and far from his studies being ancillary to his politics, his politics were simply a by-product and application of his philosophy. Thus he himself says[†] that he had been much interested in philosophy all his life, and when occupied with legal and political work was often most the philosopher when he seemed least interested in philosophy. From the year 68, when his letters to Atticus began, he often confided to his friend how much he preferred reading and study to public affairs. In one letter, written at a time of great pressure of business, he said, ‘Every day I find greater satisfaction in study, so far as my forensic labours permit.’[‡] Consider his behaviour on demitting the consulship at the end of 63. A politician ambitious for power would have taken a proconsulship of some province, from which he could return with an army to rival Caesar and Pompey; not so Cicero: his primary obligation was to Literature, and so he immediately set to work to write an account of his consulate in Latin prose, another in Greek prose, and a third in Latin verse. On his return from exile in 56 the first thing he did was to resume his reading, and he spent the greater part of the year 55 at Cumae or Naples devouring the library of Faustus Sulla (son of the dictator). He said to Atticus at that time that he would rather sit on the little chair his friend had beneath a bust of Aristotle than occupy the ivory throne of office.[§] In 51, on his way to Cilicia, he spent some time at Athens, staying in the house of the brother of his old teacher Antiochus; while there he intervened to prevent the destruction of the house in which Epicurus had lived, little though he cared for Epicurus’s teaching. (Mention has already been made of his similar action in preparing Lucretius’s poem for publication.) On his return from Cilicia in 49 he again visited Athens. The centre of the world of learning attracted him like a magnet. He wanted to leave some memorial of himself there, and if his plans came to nothing it was more probably from his natural irresolution than from any cooling of his ardour for study. More than once he boasted that at no time since his boyhood had he been divorced from philosophical studies, and there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of such statements.^{*}

Meanwhile he had begun committing the fruits of his studies to writing. In 55 he wrote a book *On the Orator*; in 54 he began *The State*,

perhaps his most original contribution to philosophy; in 52, amid distracting occupations, he wrote *The Laws*; in 46 he wrote several other books about oratory. All these works were related to Cicero's practical experience of law and politics, but in March 45 he began to produce, at amazing speed, a series of books on other aspects of philosophy, in which he covered such topics as immortality, perception, the Stoic paradoxes, the chief good, the importance of philosophy, the problem of pain, determinism, the possibility of divination and the concrete application of moral principles. During eighteen months he wrote twelve sizable treatises on such subjects, as well as essays on friendship, old age and fame. Why did he labour with such prodigious energy on these tasks, at a time of life when he might have been excused for wanting to take things a bit more easily? Cicero himself, at the beginning of *The Nature of the Gods*, gives three reasons, which are worth quotation and comment.

(1) The first reason he gives (see Section 7) is that he was at leisure with nothing else to do. 'The state of the nation was such that the government had of necessity been confided to the care and wisdom of a single man [Caesar].' Cicero was a man of great industry; idleness was abhorrent to him; he must always be employed on something useful; the Senate was now little more than a rubber stamp and he could be of little use to his country by taking part in its proceedings: could he not best serve his fellow-countrymen by writing books to teach them the arts of good living and good citizenship? (He gave a similar explanation in the preface to his second book, *On Divination*.)

(2) His second reason was that it seemed to him 'a matter of some importance for the dignity and good name of our nation, that a subject of such weight and value [as philosophy] should have its place in Latin literature'. To put this in more personal terms, Cicero had long been ambitious to do something great for Rome; it is true he had defeated Catiline, but what was the use of that if the republic was now under the tyranny of Caesar? Could he not therefore go down to fame as the saviour and benefactor of his country in quite a different sense – as the man who made available to Roman readers the treasures of Greek philosophy and expanded the Latin language for use as a vehicle for abstract thought? He had already done this in a limited sphere through his treatises on oratory and political philosophy; he now formed the idea of writing for the Latin reading public a complete encyclopedia of Greek thought. In this he would be a pioneer; there was almost no philosophical writing in Latin except a few atrociously written tracts on Epicureanism. If people objected that Latin was not a suitable language for the conveyance of abstract ideas, then he would make it so: if words were needed, he would coin them. And in point of fact he did this very thing. He invented a number of

words (such as *moralis*, *essentia*, *qualitas*) which soon became common coin, and left behind him a new style of Latin which enabled Christian theologians and humanistic philosophers for centuries afterwards to discuss the profoundest problems in a language that was in ordinary use among educated people.

(3) Cicero's third reason was quite personal. 'I was also moved to these studies by my own sickness of mind and heart, crushed and shaken as I was by the great misfortune which I had to bear.' Cicero is referring here not to his political disappointments but to the death of his daughter Tullia, a blow exacerbated by the failure of his two marriages. Cicero had married in the seventies a lady of good family and strong character named Terentia, and so far as we can tell they were on the best of terms until about 56, when they gradually grew more and more estranged until in the winter of 47/46 he divorced her. The causes of the estrangement cannot be reconstructed; it is impossible to say where the rights and wrongs lay: all we can be certain of is that Cicero had not formed any attachment to another woman; indeed he was not highly susceptible to sexual passion. As his affections for Terentia cooled off they became transferred in a sublimated way to his only daughter Tullia. When she died in the spring of 45 he was inconsolable. He had read many books of comfort for mourners, but they were of no use to him. He would spend all day in a thick wood with nothing but a book for company, but he could not keep the tears in check. Back at home in the evening he would try writing a *Consolation to Himself*, and would go on writing through the night, for he could not get much sleep. When he had finished his *Consolation* (it has not survived), he decided to go on writing, for this was the one thing that could take his mind off his grief. (Incidentally this is another sign that Cicero was primarily a student, not a man of affairs; a natural man of action would have drowned his grief in a whirl of business.) And so he began his series of philosophical books with his *Academics*, which gives an outline history of Greek philosophy and then goes on to discuss the basic question whether certainty is possible, particularly as regards our knowledge of the natural world. The psychological necessity for writing was soon increased by a further domestic tragedy. Shortly before his daughter's death he married again, his second wife being a young woman named Publilia some forty years his junior. (Terentia said he chose her for her pretty face, but Plutarch* preferred the explanation given by Cicero's secretary Tiro, that he needed her money.) One can imagine Publilia's feelings on finding she took second place to Tullia in her husband's affections, and when Tullia died, far from sharing his sorrow, she was unable to conceal her pleasure. This infuriated the already half-demented Cicero, who immediately sent her away and gave her a

divorce.

The death of Tullia has a special reference to the present work, because it brought Cicero to a very personal religious experience, though of quite a different character from his initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. He had come to believe that souls which were immaculate at death went straight to the gods to share in their nature and glory, while the others went into darkness waiting for a reincarnation in another human body. Tullia manifestly belonged to the former class; she was now one of the divine immortals, and by communing with her he would himself be in communion with the divine. He accordingly planned to build a little chapel to her memory on his estate, so that he could at any time put himself in touch with her, and through her with heaven. The chapel was apparently never built – probably not because he had changed his mind but because he could not afford the expense after repaying Publilia's dowry.

It might be thought that the three reasons given by Cicero were sufficient explanation for his philosophical writing in the years 45 and 44, but H. A. K. Hunt, in his book *The Humanism of Cicero*, has argued that Cicero's second reason does not represent the true state of the case. His contention is that Cicero's main object was ethical, not philosophical; not to give a complete course of philosophy, but to refute philosophical errors injurious to morality. Believing, with the Academy, that certainty is impossible, whether about God or the physical world or morality, he nevertheless wanted to give the ordinary man some more or less probable guidance about right conduct. Hence he must have had in mind from the beginning that the series of books would terminate (as it did) with his final treatise, *On Duties*, but before he could do that he must establish that man is a free moral agent, and for that purpose he must refute the Stoic contention that human life is under the control of gods or of fate, and this is the main purpose behind the five books preceding the final book, *On Duties*, namely the books on *The Ends of Good and Evil*, the *Tusculan Disputations*, *The Nature of the Gods*, *Divination* and *Fate*. This is not the place to examine Hunt's thesis in detail. Certainly it sheds light on the order in which Cicero selected his various topics for writing; it also explains what was one of the main motives for writing *The Nature of the Gods*; nor would Cicero have written his long work on *Divination* had he merely wanted to make Greek philosophy available to Roman readers, but the motive for writing the work becomes clear when it is realized that to Cicero, if the future can be foretold, then it is determined beforehand and free will is excluded. But Hunt's thesis cannot be accepted as the sole explanation of the order and content of Cicero's philosophical works. If his grand aim had been to establish man's freedom to make moral decisions, surely he would somewhere

have told his readers so, instead of fobbing them off with a pretence of introducing Greek thought to the Roman world. If in his theological writings Cicero was concerned simply to free man from detailed interference by gods or fate, why did he take so much trouble (not only in *The Nature of the Gods* but in other works) to refute Epicureanism, which in this respect was entirely on Cicero's side? Hunt's explanation that Epicureanism is introduced simply to throw into relief the main argument with Stoicism is not very convincing; the preliminary battle with Epicureanism tends rather to obscure the main argument – if indeed it is the main argument. Again, on Hunt's supposition it is difficult to explain why the *Academics* begins with a general history of Greek philosophy and *The Nature of the Gods* begins with a brief review of earlier Greek theories of the nature of the gods and their relation to the physical world; these digressions have little relevance to moral freedom but have a natural place as part of a plan to present the whole of Greek thought in Latin. We may therefore accept Cicero's own account as the most convincing explanation of his purpose in writing philosophical books, though we do well to remember that, as a Roman, he had a strong ethical interest in the selection and arrangement of his material. How this comes out in *The Nature of the Gods* will be considered in the next section.

As a conclusion to this general account of Cicero as a philosophical writer, something may be said about three reproaches commonly made against his competence in this field.

(1) It is said that because he wrote these books at great speed, they must have been carelessly written, without attention to style, clarity or logical arrangement. But in point of fact the books do not show many signs of haste. As already pointed out, Cicero was well versed in his subject; good writing came naturally to him; and the arrangement of the books, with the interplay of dialogue, often shows considerable artistry. With his secretary Tiro always available to take his dictation down in shorthand, Cicero could get through an immense amount of high-quality work in a short time. It must be admitted, however, that parts of some of the books have been left in a somewhat rough state; presumably Cicero intended to polish them up before publication but never got round to it. He knew that at any moment a change in the political situation might require his return to public life, and he wanted to get the substance of as many works as possible down on paper while there was still time. As explained on [page 33](#), it is probable that *The Nature of the Gods* never reached its final state.

(2) Cicero is also accused of complete lack of originality: all he did was translate from the Greek. His own words are cast in his teeth: he admitted to his friend Atticus that his philosophical works 'are only copies, and don't involve much labour; all I contribute is the words – I

have plenty of those!’* This remark, however, should not be taken too seriously; it was a somewhat playful explanation of how he managed to get through so much work, and needs to be balanced by other of Cicero’s statements, such as that ‘we are not mere translators, but contribute our own judgement in deciding what to select and how to present it.’† Which was the fact. When presenting Plato’s *Timaeus*, he simply made a translation of it, but in presenting (say) Stoic thought on a certain topic he would select and arrange his material as he thought best, sometimes closely following a Greek original, sometimes giving only a paraphrase or summary. But of course Cicero would not have claimed more originality than that, for in Cicero’s day (to quote Reid’s words) there was ‘absolutely no demand whatever for views of truth which professed to be new. Originality in a philosopher, far from being looked upon as a merit, would rather have been treated as a sin.’ Nor is there any philosophical merit in originality: the question to ask of a philosophy is not whether it is original but whether it is true.

(3) It is also pointed out that in spite of the apparent art of Cicero’s writing, there are often inconsistencies between one part of a book and another, the argument is sometimes inconsequent, and the subject-matter not always lucidly arranged. Such criticisms can be made by an attentive reader of *The Nature of the Gods*. Those who make such criticisms, however, should remember that the fault may lie not in Cicero but in his Greek sources. As these have nearly all perished it is not fair to put all the blame on Cicero, who felt it his duty to present the Roman world with Greek thought as it was, not as he would have wished it to be.

So much for Cicero in general, as a man and as a philosopher. A little more needs to be said about *The Nature of the Gods* in particular.

2

THE NATURE OF THE GODS

By the summer of 45 B.C. Cicero had written the first four instalments of his course of Greek philosophy. He had begun with the chief current problem in the theory of knowledge, namely whether we can have certain knowledge, and whether we can trust our eyes and ears; these questions are argued in the *Academics*. Next he considered the chief problem in ethics, namely what is the highest good we should aim at; this is the theme of *The Ends of Good and Evil*. He then returned to his more private need of consolation in his bereavement, and discussed the immortality of the soul in the *Tusculan Disputations*. Simultaneously, however, he turned his attention to the relation between God (or gods) and the world, and for this purpose translated

Plato's *Timaeus*, perhaps intending to include this in some larger work, for it was not published in Cicero's lifetime.

After these preliminaries Cicero wanted to make a more detailed study of ethical problems, which he eventually did in his book *On Duties*. But before he could do this there was a theological difficulty to be resolved. Although Cicero's primary interest was in ethics, he was convinced that morality could not be maintained without the support of religion. But can a reasonable man believe in and practise the kind of religion that will form the basis of morality? If the Epicureans are right, the gods are not concerned with the world and make no difference to it; such gods cannot honestly be worshipped, and indeed the Epicureans regarded religion as an evil thing from which mankind should be set free. It seems necessary, therefore, to believe in real gods who make a difference to life on earth, for example, by punishing wickedness and providing for the needs of mankind. Shall we then embrace the Stoic system, which teaches that there is detailed divine control of human affairs? But that system encourages many kinds of superstition and has been subjected to highly damaging criticism by the Academic school of thought. Moreover Cicero may well have had in mind that if, as some Stoics taught, God and nature are really identical, so that everything that happens is determined by the nature of things, then man has no real freedom of choice and it becomes pointless to talk about right and wrong, good and evil. Hence before one can discuss moral problems one must first examine the theological problem of providence – of the nature of the effect, if any, which the gods have upon human affairs. It is this problem which forms the chief subject of *The Nature of the Gods*. This is made quite clear by Cicero in Section 3 of [Book I](#). In a nutshell, the problem is: Is there a tenable position between atheism and superstition?

This being so, Cicero might have entitled the book *On Providence*, but he probably had two reasons for not doing so. In the first place Cicero never forgot that he was writing a general course in Greek philosophy, and wanted to be free to include in this book other aspects of the divine nature and activity. In the second place, the word itself would not be meaningful to most Roman readers, because Cicero was the first to use it in its theological sense, there being no Latin equivalent of the Greek word *pronoia* much used by the Stoics. Moreover the title *The Nature of the Gods* had already been used by Xenocrates and Chrysippus (see [Book I](#), Sections 34 and 41), and by using the same title Cicero would show that he was in the great tradition.

How did Cicero set about his task? As an adherent of the Academy he believed it would be wrong to go straight ahead and state his own convictions; the right method in philosophy was to state and examine

the currently held positions, keeping one's own views in reserve, and only at the end to attempt to decide which solution seemed to approach most nearly to the truth. Hence Cicero's work, like all his philosophical writings, is cast in the form of a dialogue. For Cicero the dialogue was not merely a literary convenience: it was a philosophical necessity.

In writing in dialogue form Cicero may have been breaking fresh ground. There were many extant treatises expounding one view of a question; there were also collections of philosophical opinions on various topics, but merely for record: what Cicero set out to do was to expound the different opinions and then subject them to criticism. This was of course quite different from the Platonic style of dialogue in which Socrates subjects various views to a running fire of cross-examination: Cicero's method was to let each speaker have his full say and then let a critic comment at length.

The Nature of the Gods is in the form of an imaginary conversation which is supposed to have taken place in the year 77 or 76 in the house of Gaius Aurelius Cotta, the others present being Gaius Velleius, Quintus Lucilius Balbus and Cicero himself. The date was carefully chosen in order that Cicero, being much younger than the others, would not be expected to take an active part in the discussion but could reserve his own position till the end. Although Cicero establishes at the outset that he belongs to the Academy, he makes clear at the end of Section 17 of [Book I](#) that he will leave his fellow-Academic Cotta to be the expert on Philo's teaching; he himself will out-Academic the Academics by being sceptical even of their scepticism, thus safeguarding his freedom to form his own judgement.

The three speakers also were carefully chosen. Of Velleius and Balbus we know almost nothing, and doubtless so little was remembered about them by the time Cicero wrote that he felt himself free to dress them up as the typical Epicurean and the typical Stoic. Thus Cicero is able to satirize Epicureanism at the outset by bringing Velleius on stage as the dogmatic convert whose master Epicurus has solved all problems and who tramples on all rival doctrines with the arrogance of a first-year undergraduate. Balbus is more attractively presented as a typical Stoic, combining the role of the warmhearted preacher aflame with admiration for the harmony of the universe with that of the logical thinker who has worked out for himself a rational explanation of his beliefs. By contrast to these two lay-figures, Cotta was a well-known Roman of the first quarter of the century; a distinguished orator and politician, he became consul in the year 75 and is known to have been an adherent of the Academy. This would have been enough to serve Cicero's purpose, but the reason why he chose Cotta in particular to state the Academic case would seem to

have been that already by 77 Cotta had been appointed to the life office of pontifex, which involved among other things the supervision of religious formalities. This is strongly emphasized at more than one point in the dialogue, and enables Cicero to characterize Cotta not only as the urbane man of the world who exposes the weaknesses of the Stoic system, but also as the devout believer who had no intention to overturn religion, but accepted it on the strength of tradition and merely wished to remove bad arguments for it (see I.118; III.9,93).

It may be wondered at that Cicero should have thought three speakers enough, when so many different views had been expressed by Greek writers on the nature of the gods and their relations with the world. The answer seems to be twofold. In the first place, to the cultured Roman there were really only three philosophies to choose between: Epicureanism, Stoicism and the Academy. As will be shown in the next section, the last two existed in more than one form and some teachers tried to combine the two, but broadly speaking there were only three effective choices. (A fourth school, the Peripatetic, did exist, but was less influential than the others in Cicero's day; in any case, as pointed out in I.7, on the question of Providence there was little difference between the Peripatetics and the Stoics – it was on ethics that they parted company.) A second reason for confining the speakers to three was that for the purpose of the debate about Providence three speakers were enough – one to put the case for atheism, one to put the case for providence, and a third to voice objections to each. Other views on the question could be mentioned in the course of the debate without the necessity of complicating the main issue by the introduction of additional speakers.

The dialogue begins, then, with an introduction in which Cicero explains what its purpose is (I.1–17). In this he makes clear that although he himself belongs to the sceptical school of the Academy, the last thing he wants to do is to destroy religion, for it is the cement of society and the foundation of justice. He therefore indicates in advance that the scales are going to be more heavily weighted against Epicurus than against the Stoa.

Velleius (the Epicurean) is put in to speak first. His speech falls into three parts.

(1) First he delivers a highly prejudiced attack on the Stoic doctrine of providence (I.18–24); this serves to indicate that the main debate is to be about providence; and the brevity and arrogance of the attack predispose the reader to give a favourable hearing to the careful exposition of the Stoic position when Balbus's turn comes in [Book II](#).

(2) Next Velleius delivers a brief and hostile summary of all other previous Greek speculations on the nature of the gods (Sections 25–

41). Why Cicero included this is not clear; if he intended it for the education of Roman readers a more objective summary would have had greater value; if he intended it as a satire on the Epicurean contempt for all other systems, it is rather tedious. It can safely be skipped by any reader who wants to get on with the main argument.

(3) After this Velleius addresses his proper task, an exposition of Epicureanism so far as it relates to the nature of the gods and the question whether they have any influence on earthly affairs (42–56). No doubt Cicero took this account from some existing treatise, but it is highly condensed and not very attractively presented. The last thing Cicero wanted was to enlist the sympathies of any reader for a philosophy which excluded religion and therefore cut the ground from under morality.

The remainder of [Book I](#) is taken up with Cotta's reply (57–124). This is much longer than Velleius's exposition; it is evident on which side Cicero's preferences lay. Although the reply is put in the mouth of an Academic, it is probably taken, partly at least, from a Stoic source; since its source or sources were not related to the source from which Cicero derived Velleius's exposition, some of Velleius's claims are not answered. Cotta's speech is somewhat diffuse and ill-ordered. Its main objects are to show the absurdity of the Epicurean contentions that (a) we can believe in the existence of gods simply because such belief is universal and some people have seen visions of them, and (b) the gods exist somewhere in space, in human form but without human bodies. The net result is to show that Epicureanism is no more satisfactory in its account of the gods than any of the other theories which it condemned, and the way is now clear for an exposition of Stoicism.

At the beginning of [Book II](#) it is assumed that Epicureanism has been finally disposed of; all that remains is to consider the claims of Stoicism, which are presented at length by Balbus in the whole of [Book II](#). Balbus claims to make a reasoned case for the Stoic position under four heads:

- (1) There are divine beings;
- (2) What they are like;
- (3) The universe is under their control;
- (4) They care for human welfare and give help to individuals.

These four points are expounded respectively in Sections 4–44; 45–72; 73–162; and 162–168. The material, however, is not always well arranged and sometimes an argument given under one head would have come more appropriately under another. No doubt Cicero was drawing on more than one source and found difficulty in putting all the diverse arguments in logical order; this has also resulted in some

internal inconsistencies, for (as will be shown in [section 3](#) below) Stoicism was not a static body of dogma like Epicureanism but was restated in various forms down the centuries. Thus we find side by side in Balbus's exposition two quite different conceptions of God and of Providence. There is the original Stoic pantheism, which held that the whole universe is divine and God just another name for nature, so that everything in the world is divinely determined; superimposed on this is a more Platonic conception, imported later into Stoicism, which set over against the universe a free rational deity caring for men and (through the instrumentality of lesser deities) interfering for their welfare. Another defect in Balbus's discourse is that, long as it is, it is further lengthened by needless digressions. Sections 91–104 say quite enough about the wonders of the stars and it was unnecessary for Cicero to devote the next four chapters to extracts from his own translation of Aratus's poem on astronomy. Again, Sections 59–72, which catalogue deities invented for trivial reasons, add nothing to the Stoic case but rather detract from it, and should have been included, if at all, in [Book III](#); but Cicero could not resist the temptation to parade his learning at this point. Another matter for regret is the shortness of the final section on the care of the gods for individuals (Sections 162–168). Perhaps Cicero felt Balbus had by now spoken for long enough; perhaps his sources failed him at this point; perhaps he wanted to keep something in reserve for his treatise *On Divination*: but as this is the most vulnerable part of the doctrine of providence it ought to have been given a full defence. In spite of these imperfections, [Book II](#) contains much eloquent writing and interesting argumentation. It has been highly praised, for example, by Mayor, who found in it 'perhaps the most important contribution to theological thought which has come down to us from classical times'.* Pease has judged that Cicero's exposition of Stoicism, 'in spite of careless and hasty composition, raises philosophical writing from the dull level into which it seems to have fallen among the Greeks to a literary form which may well arouse the admiration and challenge the imitation of modern popularizers in this field.'[†]

[Book III](#) consists of Cotta's commentary on Balbus's exposition of Stoicism. (Velleius is assumed to have nothing more to say.) Cotta's speech is not intended as a complete refutation of Stoicism; Cicero is merely concerned, as a good Academic, that whatever can be said in derogation of Stoicism should be said, so that no one shall sit in judgement on the issues without having heard the pleadings on both sides. As already explained, Cotta is brought in as a religious believer; at the end of [Book II](#) Balbus appealed to him, as a pontifex, not to commit the impiety of arguing against the gods; he had already (in I.118) made clear that his aim (and of course Cicero's also) was to

banish superstition without overthrowing religion; and at the end of the day he explains that his intention was not to deny the existence of the gods but only to show how difficult it is to construct a rational theology (III.93 and 95). Perhaps the most important remark in the whole work is Cotta's complaint at III.9 that he was quite happy to take his religion on trust from tradition, but the more it is defended by argument the more doubtful it becomes. Had he been alive today he would have warmly applauded Karl Barth's repudiation of all 'apologetic'.

No doubt Cicero found it necessary to safeguard his work in this way from misunderstanding (and he had to repeat the disclaimer in the preface to his next book, *On Divination*), because some of Cotta's criticisms are very damaging to any doctrine of providence. It is however difficult to make a fair appraisal of [Book III](#) because it suffers from even more serious defects than the previous book. In the first place, perhaps a third of the book has been lost, the biggest gap being in Section 66, involving the loss of the whole of the reply to Balbus's point (3) and the first part of the reply to point (4). The copy from which all our manuscripts are derived seems to have come to pieces and to have been reassembled with some of the pages misplaced and many others altogether missing. Apart from this, [Book III](#) suffers, like [Book II](#), from some carelessness of arrangement, and the replies do not always fit the arguments replied to because the material used by Cicero for [Book III](#) was probably written in the second century B.C. (by Clitomachus, pupil of the great Academic Carneades) in refutation of an earlier form of Stoicism than that expounded in [Book II](#). This book, too, suffers from some unnecessary displays of erudition, particularly the description in Sections 63–65 of the conflation of several gods into one and the invention of deities from etymology.

It must also be admitted that the dialogue as a whole suffers from the abruptness of its ending. If Cicero intended to accept part of the Stoic system but to abandon its absurdities, should he not have indicated where he wanted to draw the line? It looks as if he intended at first to add a fourth book giving Balbus's reply to Cotta but then thought better of it; perhaps he decided it was too difficult – he had no Greek models ready to hand. (For other signs that the book did not receive its final revision see the footnotes on [pp. 153](#) and [200](#).) Instead of directly continuing the debate on providence Cicero decided to examine in greater detail two particular aspects of it, and proceeded to write the treatises *On Divination* and *On Fate*.

All Cicero offers us by way of conclusion is his own verdict that the Stoic speaker had the better of the argument. This verdict has puzzled many writers, who mistakenly assumed that Cicero was a sceptic in religion and that as a professed Academic in philosophy he ought to

have sided with Cotta. Some have supposed that his final vote for Balbus was written with his tongue in his cheek, to prevent readers from thinking he was not in support of the politically expedient state religion. Others have thought that he voted against Cotta on true Academic principles, just to show his independence; but in that case Cicero could best have shown his independence by refraining from comment altogether. The truth is rather that though Cicero was an Academic in method he did not always accept the conclusions of the Academy on theology or religion. He was no sceptic in religion, and though he deplored Stoicism's encouragement of superstition he was much attracted by many of its features; for instance his books on *The State* and *The Laws* are heavily indebted to the Stoic conception of natural law as flowing from God, from whom man derives his nature. There is therefore no reason to doubt the sincerity or importance of Cicero's final comment, which indeed is in accordance with the whole tendency of the book.

It is true that many subsequent writers have found the book inimical rather than favourable to religion. This will be described in [section 4](#) below. Meanwhile it may be useful to give a brief account of the rival philosophies handled in the book, for though its central theme is of perennial interest the particular schools of thought which debated it are strange and unfamiliar to most of us today.

3

THE RIVAL PHILOSOPHIES

Many references are made in *The Nature of the Gods* to individual Greek philosophers, and readers may be puzzled by what seems the disproportionate emphasis placed on thinkers whom we would now regard as of very small importance. To us Plato and Aristotle stand head and shoulders above all other Greek philosophers; their predecessors, such as Socrates, Democritus, Heraclitus and Parmenides, are of interest only as preparing the way for them; their successors, Epicurus and Zeno, are known not for their insight as philosophers but as founders of semi-religious ways of life; the subsequent writers whom Cicero so often mentions, such as Chrysippus, Carneades, Philo and Antiochus, are unknown even to solvers of *Times* crossword puzzles. Why is this so? Were Cicero and his contemporaries unable to appreciate the superlative merits of Plato and Aristotle, or has the Western world been at fault for overvaluing them these last eight hundred years? The answer lies in the history of the Greek outlook on life.

Greek philosophy falls into three unequal periods. The first of these

belongs to the sixth and fifth centuries, when the Greeks began to speculate on the physical universe: how did it come into existence, what is it ultimately made of and has it any permanence in itself? Towards the end of the fifth century, under the stimulus of thinkers such as Protagoras and Socrates, interest shifted from nature to man, and the crucial question became: What is the basis of a just social order? This was the supreme topic pursued by Plato and Aristotle in the following century, and to that question even their great writings on logic, physics and metaphysics were subordinate. About the time of Aristotle's death (322 B.C.) a third period began – not because Aristotle had been proved wrong but because the chief interest of the Greek world had silently shifted. The burning issues no longer concerned human rights and duties but were turned back on the individual: the supreme question now was a personal one: How am I related to the universe? How can I get peace of mind? This change may have been connected with the absorption of the old Greek city-states into the new Macedonian empire, so that the Greeks felt they had lost their anchorage and wanted a new faith; moreover the political change brought much greater freedom of movement in the eastern Mediterranean and a livelier interchange of ideas. Whatever the cause, the fact remains that after 322 Plato and Aristotle, though still honoured as founders of philosophical schools, ceased to be much read or studied because they had not addressed themselves to the problems that were exercising the minds of the new age. Moreover an age hungry for emotional satisfaction demanded something much simpler than the complexities of the Platonic and Aristotelian systems. Philosophies, as Whitehead has remarked, are not refuted; they are abandoned. The new attitude to philosophy continued for many centuries – in fact until the establishment of Christianity gave a new certainty to the world of thought – and consequently for the purposes of background to Cicero Greek philosophy can be taken as beginning, where for most modern philosophers it ends, with the death of Aristotle in 322 B.C.

Epicureanism

Just at the time when the Greek world was crying out for a gospel of peace, EPICURUS was at hand with a simple specific. Born in 341 in Samos of an Athenian father, he studied philosophy in various towns in the Aegean area, and set up as a teacher in Mytilene about 310, from where he removed to Athens about 306. He had an intense conviction of the rightness of the views he had formed, and of the wrongness of all his predecessors, whom he covered with foul abuse

and from whom he claimed to have learned nothing. On the other hand he had great personal charm and winsomeness, and a character which the Greeks might have described as saintly, if they had had a word for it. He gathered round himself a company of disciples including both men and women, citizens and slaves, who were intensely devoted to each other and especially to their master, whom they venerated almost as a god. This brotherhood met in Epicurus's private garden, for he did not teach in public, partly because he did not court popularity, partly because he did not want his meetings disturbed by people who ignorantly thought he was encouraging debauchery. The movement continued after his death, repeating the master's teaching with little or no alteration. We know the names of some of his disciples and later exponents of his philosophy, such as Metrodorus, Hermarchus and Cicero's teacher Phaedrus, but there was not a single original thinker amongst them. The brotherhood had all the vitality of a closed system; in the second century B.C. it spread to Italy, and it did not die until about A.D. 300, when it disappeared under the hostility of Christianity, to which it was not fitted to be an effective rival.

What was this simple gospel which made so strong an appeal to so many different kinds of Greeks and Romans? In essence it was a recipe for the attainment of personal happiness; and to Epicurus happiness consisted simply of freedom from trouble and anxiety, for once these have been removed pleasure cannot be increased – it can only be varied. Now the principal causes of anxiety are fear of the gods and fear of death. The first of these Epicurus proposed to banish by the atomic theory: far from creating the world or having any control over it, the gods are simply a product of the atomic system. Originally there was nothing in existence but infinite atoms all falling downwards by the force of gravity; somehow into this system there entered a declination, or swerve, which enabled the atoms to coalesce and form bodies – first inorganic, then organic, human and finally divine, for even the gods consist of atoms, though of the most rarefied kind. The swerve was added by Epicurus to the deterministic atomism of Democritus, with the object of safeguarding human free will, so that man is at once master of his own destiny and also free from interference by the gods and from any fear of divine punishment. This atomic theory was also designed to banish the other great fear, the fear of death. For nothing exists except atoms and empty space; even the human soul – the thinking and sensitive part of the person – is of material composition, being made of especially fine particles akin to those of the atmosphere; it follows that when death occurs, through loss of vital atoms, the whole material body disintegrates and there is no separate soul to survive. Hence there can be no punishment after

death and no fear of death, for as the Master said: 'Death, the most frightful of evils, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is absent, but when death comes, we are non-existent.'

But what certainty can we have that these liberating doctrines are true? Epicurus was ready with a theory of knowledge. Since our whole nature is material, our only means of knowledge is through the senses, but they can be absolutely trusted, for the one certainty in the world is matter impinging on matter; doubt and uncertainty are caused only by fallible human opinions. Thus there are three sources of knowledge: (a) sensations of sight, sound, touch etc.; (b) general concepts formed out of repeated sensations; and (c) our internal feelings whereby we distinguish pleasure as good from pain as evil. Of course our senses sometimes mislead us, but that is not the fault of the senses, but our fault for forming wrong opinions about the material presented to us by them. (This was Epicurus's own explanation; his followers tried to improve on it by contending that perception is due to objects continually throwing off material images which can change their shape and colour by conflict with the atoms of the atmosphere as they pass through it to our senses. This was hardly an improvement, because it meant that our senses no longer tell us about things but only about their images.)

From this it follows that there are gods, for mankind has formed general concepts of the gods as a result of repeated visions of them. But if there are gods (as there surely are), they must be perfect, untroubled by pain or anxiety of any kind and untouched by death; to fit this conception into the atomic theory Epicurus placed the gods in windless spaces between the worlds, where their refined atomic constitution would be free from any physical harm, and their continual loss of atoms would be as continually replenished by infinite supplies, so that they would never suffer death. Neither is their perfect happiness disturbed by any care or thought for human affairs. It follows that men should worship and adore the gods as models for human perfection, and perhaps even hold mystical communion with them; but to ask anything from them is useless and mistaken, because all beliefs in any power of the gods over earthly affairs are based not on truth but on erroneous human opinion.

The foregoing account of the Epicurean theory of knowledge is to be found in most writers of recent times, but there is some reason to think, with De Witt, that Epicurus himself included in source (b) not only concepts derived from sensations but also innate ideas (the Greek word *prolepsis* literally means a pre-concept or anticipation). This is where men get, for instance, their conceptions of justice, of time and of the existence of the gods. If this view is correct, it introduces a fundamental inconsistency into the simplicity of the Epicurean system,

and leaves it wide open to attack by those who would argue that if we have innate ideas of the gods, why not also of human immortality? On the other hand if there are no such innate ideas, how do we know that the gods are immortal or perfect or happy (which cannot be deduced from sense-impressions), and how can we distinguish true visions of gods from false dreams and hallucinations? It may well be that Epicurus thought his pure materialism needed supplementation. Moreover if Epicurus had no place for innate ideas in his system, then Cicero made a serious error in attributing this view to him, for it is quite clear from Sections 43–49 of [Book I](#) of *The Nature of the Gods* that Cicero understood Epicurus to rely on a pre-concept to justify the existence of the gods, though their nature was known by inferences from sense-experience. Cicero may not have fully understood the philosophies he was expounding, but he had Epicurus's full treatises before him as he wrote, whereas we have only fragments and interpretations. This issue must be left in suspense: the view we take of it will depend on whether we attach greater importance to Cicero's credibility or to Epicurus's logical consistency.

As already explained, the sole object of the Epicurean system was ethical, and in ethics as in everything else the criterion was a material one: do I feel pleasure? But by this Epicurus understood not intensity of enjoyment but freedom from anxiety, and the ideal Epicurean state was like that of the gods – calm, imperturbable, blissful repose. Epicurus has been vilified, both in his own day and since, as a voluptuary and a profligate, but in fact he discouraged his followers from reckless indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh, because this did not lead to true happiness. It was better to cultivate contentment and self-sufficiency by leading the simple life. 'Give me plain water and a loaf of barley-bread,' he said, 'and I will dispute the prize of happiness with Zeus himself': Epicurus was no epicure. For the same reason he discouraged involvement in political affairs, rejected all social ambition and desire for applause, and disparaged all learning except what was strictly relevant to the Epicurean philosophy; enjoy music, yes, but musical theory is a waste of time. Yet the road to happiness does not lie in complete selfishness: it is found rather in friendship, virtue, wisdom and benevolence. Such was the way of life which proved so attractive an ideal to many in the Graeco-Roman world, in spite of obvious improbabilities and inconsistencies in its dogmatic basis.

Stoicism

Close on the heels of Epicurus, perhaps even a few years ahead of him,

another prophet emerged in Athens, offering his own nostrum for the contemporary malaise. ZENO,* a Phoenician born in Cyprus, came to Athens in early manhood and after long study of philosophy set up as a teacher of it at an uncertain date about the close of the century. The place he chose for his lectures was the *Stoa Poikile* or Painted Colonnade, and this is how his followers became known as Stoics. He was succeeded as head of the Stoa about 263 by his pupil CLEANTHES, and Cleanthes in turn was succeeded about 233 by CHRYSIPPUS. It is not always possible to distinguish the different contributions made to Stoic thought by Zeno the oracular founder, Cleanthes the poet and Chrysippus the great systematizer, and the following brief account will deal as a whole with the body of thought which was formed in this period known as the Early Stoa, though its main principles were laid down by Zeno himself.

It is often thought that Epicurus and Zeno were poles asunder, one seeking pleasure without God, the other seeking austere virtue and the performance of the Divine will. It is true the two founders were implacably hostile to each other, but in fact there is a strong resemblance between their two philosophies, and there may even have been some unacknowledged mutual borrowing between them. Both addressed themselves to the same problem: How can man get peace of mind in an apparently hostile universe? Both set forth the same moral ideal – the cultivation of calm imperturbability and the living of the simple life. Both believed that the senses were the primary source of knowledge, that through this means certainty could be obtained, and that only material things are real. The root difference between the two men lay in their diagnoses of the causes of human misery. To Epicurus, man's greatest need was to be rid of fear, especially of the gods and of death; to Zeno, man's greatest need was to be able to cope with sorrow, disappointment and misfortune. It was to meet this need that Zeno, using a theory of knowledge similar to that of Epicurus and pursuing a similar goal, developed a quite different picture of the universe and its relation to deity. Epicurus had to show that the gods have nothing to do with the world, which is the product of blind, purposeless atoms, and therefore there is no need to worry over the artificial problems created by religion. Zeno on the other hand had to show that the gods have everything to do with the world, for the whole world is an organic, purposeful Whole, and therefore if you co-operate with the Whole there is no need to worry over the apparent ills of life, for they all contribute to the one grand all-embracing purpose.

Thus the basic doctrine of the Stoics was pantheism. All things form a single unity which may be described as God, or Nature, or Reason. If you like you can call God the soul of the world, but that does not

mean that he has any separate existence, for nothing exists but matter – that is plain common sense, for we see that only material things act on each other. But of course such things as colour and shape and virtue and intelligence are realities, therefore they are made of matter too, but are not separate from the things they belong to but are totally interfused throughout them. The relation of God to the world is simply a special case of this general truth: just as the human soul is made of matter in its subtlest form, which we can call fire or breath, so also the originating principle of the universe is a cosmic Fire or Breath or Aether, which has expressed itself in the physical universe and penetrates the whole, governing it by sovereign Reason. True happiness comes from cooperating with this Reason and accepting everything as contributing to its self-expression.

If it was objected that the world contains much that appears to be evil and not in accordance with any good or rational purpose, the Stoics were never quite sure what to reply. Sometimes they would insist that in spite of appearances everything really is for the best; good cannot be good unless it has evil as its counterpart; the apparent evils in the world are like the absurdities in a comedy, a necessary contribution to the total effect. At other times they would make a distinction between the perfect universal Reason and its particular manifestations. Not everything is equally divine, for the deity exists partly in the subordinate form of human nature, which is free to do evil, and partly in the still lower form of inert matter; but this gives no cause for despair, for in due time there will be a universal conflagration in which the entire material world (and that means everything) will be reabsorbed into the primal fire, which is God, and everything will again be entirely divine. But because it is the nature of divinity, or fire, or reason, to express itself by conversion into particular objects, another universe will come into being exactly like this one, and that in turn will be reabsorbed in another conflagration, and so *ad infinitum*.

What, then, happens to the soul at death? Plato had distinguished between God and the world, soul and body, but Zeno repudiated such distinctions (did he bring this from his oriental origin?) and to be consistent he would have had to say either that the soul perishes with the body or that at death it is immediately reabsorbed in the world-soul. Cleanthes, however, held that all departed souls continued in existence until the next conflagration. Chrysippus took a middle but still illogical position by confining this privilege to the souls of the wise.

But how may we be sure that all this optimistic speculation is true? Like Epicurus, Zeno was ready with a theory of knowledge, and a very similar one too, for both men were materialists and based knowledge

primarily on sense-perception. Zeno's theory, as elaborated by Chrysippus, was that our sensations plant images on us as a seal on wax. (Our minds, of course, being material, can take such impressions.) Our reason then gets to work on these impressions and interprets them. From this come memory, experience and general conclusions. If we thus find an impression really grasps its object we can be certain of its truth. So we can also if a general concept is in agreement with certain 'common notions' which come naturally to all intelligent beings, in so far as they are truly rational. These are not 'innate ideas' planted in the soul before birth, for at birth the soul is like a blank sheet of paper, but they take shape in the soul through the proper exercise of the rational faculty. Error arises from failure to interpret sense-impressions correctly or through artificial thinking not in accordance with natural reason, which is another name for God or Reality. (If anybody objected that the whole Stoic system seemed to him highly artificial and unreasonable, the Stoic would have had no reply except to say that the objector was evidently not one of the wise. Here again appears the fundamental ambiguity from which Stoicism could never escape: are we to follow nature, that is think as we like, or follow reason, that is accept the discipline imposed on us by hard logic?)

Ambivalent also was the attitude of Stoicism to religion. If everything is divine, man included, there seems no room left for religion, and so Zeno deprecated the erection of temples and denied any reality to the deities of popular religion (*Nature of the Gods* I.36); for if the whole world is God, God cannot be in human form, nor can there be more gods than one (cf. *Nature of the Gods* II.45). Chrysippus also poured scorn on the popular mythologies. On the other hand Cleanthes wrote a hymn of praise to Zeus, and from quite early times the Stoics were prepared to tolerate the popular religion, since it could be pressed into the service of Stoicism, the myths and gods being made to express Stoic truths by means of allegory and etymology. The Stoics were also prepared to accept the practice of divination, on the ground that through this means the eternal Reason disclosed some of its purposes as regards the future. And this also is why the Stoics believed in a detailed providence, though they wavered between picturing this as the inexorable working-out of the laws of nature which determined everything and the loving care for the individual needs of mankind displayed by a personal deity. This ambivalence can be seen at many points in *The Nature of the Gods*.

But the great object of Stoicism was not to reach correct views about the world and God but to teach men the art of living. This was summed up in the simple precept 'follow nature'. But what nature was to be followed? The nature of the universe, said Cleanthes. And also of

one's own self, added Chrysippus. This meant following one's true nature, which is reason, in other words virtue. This is the only good thing in the world, and failure to conform to the divine reason is the only evil. All other things supposed to be good – such as health, wealth, pleasure or the arts – are ethically neutral, and should not be desired or striven for, though they can be gladly accepted if they come as by-products. But the essential thing is to act from a virtuous motive according to man's rational nature; once a man has done that he can live a self-sufficient life, indifferent to fame, neglect, wealth, poverty, pleasure and pain, because he knows he is in harmony with the eternal purpose of the world. The Stoic thus achieved, by a very different route, the same imperturbability and detachment from the world that was attained by the Epicurean; and just as the Epicurean found happiness by abstinence from pleasures, so just as paradoxically the Stoic followed nature by a highly artificial discipline. But he got peace of mind, which was the object of the exercise.

It should be added that just as Epicureanism was not purely selfish but encouraged a camaraderie among the brotherhood, so also Stoicism saw man's nature and destiny to lie in society. The virtuous man was a good citizen. And more than this, the Stoic saw that all mankind, possibly even slaves, were potentially if not actually partakers of the divine nature and therefore formed a single brotherhood, so that the good man was a citizen of the world and owed a duty to humanity.

Such were the salient features of the Early Stoa, so far as the system can be pieced together from the somewhat conflicting accounts of later writers. But Stoicism was not a static system like Epicureanism; the founder's views were not sacrosanct; and in the course of centuries various thinkers departed from the original model, particularly on the theoretical side in order to meet objections raised by Epicureans and the Academy. Hence arose the Middle Stoa. Important for the present purpose is PANAETIUS, who came to Rome in the middle of the second century B.C. as a missionary of Hellenic culture and sought to commend Stoicism in a form less vulnerable to the criticisms of his older contemporary Carneades, the Academic leader (of whom more below). Panaetius, believing that fire was not supreme over the other elements, had no place in his teaching for a universal conflagration, but preferred to regard the material world as eternal. He rejected astrology and divination, but believed in providence in the sense that the world is controlled by an immanent Spirit which appears in the lower creation as nature and in man as reason. In ethics he softened the austerity of traditional Stoicism by allowing that those who cannot achieve a perfectly rational life may nevertheless do 'appropriate' actions in given circumstances; this formed the basis for Cicero's

subsequent treatise *On Duties*.

Another deviant Stoic was POSIDONIUS, under whom Cicero studied as a young man. The evidence for his actual views is on some points in conflict, but it seems that he was more orthodox than Panaetius in accepting divination, astrology and perhaps also the conflagration, but he carried a stage further the process of modifying the original pantheism in a dualistic direction. Posidonius distinguished God from the world and the soul from the body. God was superior to nature, nature superior to fate; God is the soul of the world, existing in space as a kind of outer integument of the spherical universe, holding it all together. The human soul is a sort of semi-divine spirit inhabiting the body, and possibly surviving it after death. Some of these ideas were incorporated into Stoicism from Plato, and the Posidonian reinterpretation of Stoicism had a considerable influence on what is known as the Late Stoa of the first and second centuries A.D., as exemplified in the writings of Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; but as this whole third period of Stoicism is later than Cicero it would only be confusing to give any account of it here.

The reader of [Book II](#) of *The Nature of the Gods* will notice that it jumbles together a number of different and sometimes inconsistent theories about deity and providence. This is partly because in his account of Stoicism Cicero draws on more than one source (his principal authority was probably Posidonius, but some passages may be from Panaetius and specific mention is made of Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus); but the inconsistencies are also due to the inherent ambiguity in Stoicism, which could never make its mind up whether the whole world is divine, automatically working out to perfection, or the field of a constant struggle between good and evil. But this ambiguity, though unsatisfying to the intellect, strengthened the system as a practical guide to living, for the first aspect inspired the believing Stoic to cheerful acceptance of pain and misfortune, while the second inspired him to earnest moral endeavour.

The Academy

The history of the Academy is not – any more than that of the Stoa – the history of a single school of thought. It is commonly divided into five periods, though the second, third and fourth have a good deal in common. The earlier story is not directly relevant to the present work, but something has to be said about it for better understanding of the later periods.

The Academy was originally a gymnasium near Athens where Plato taught. After Plato's death in 348/7 his teaching was continued by

SPEUSIPPUS, XENOCRATES and POLEMO. They were interested mainly in expounding Plato's ethical teaching. This period was known as the First Academy.

When ARCESILAS succeeded to the headship of the Academy about 266 he revolutionized its teaching, and with him began what was known as the Second or Middle Academy. He claimed that the true spirit of Socrates and Plato was to be found not in a system of ethics but in a philosophical method – the method of scepticism, which criticizes every position and refuses to make any definite affirmation (*Nature of the Gods* I.11). Whether this was true Platonism is open to question. Arcesilas was concerned to refute the contentions of the Epicureans and Stoics that knowledge could be obtained through the senses; the senses are fallible and there is no means of knowing with certainty whether they are deceiving us; and since (unlike Plato) Arcesilas believed that there could be no other source of knowledge, he concluded that truth is unattainable; or if we do stumble on the truth, we can never know whether we have done so.

Scepticism of this kind was no novelty. A similar philosophy had been propounded a generation earlier by Pyrrho, who also had exposed the weakness of the Epicurean and Stoic claims to certainty through sense-perception, and had taught that their goal of imperturbability could be much better reached through withholding judgement on all matters and retiring into a state of serene indifference. Arcesilas differed from Pyrrho, however, in his objective: Pyrrho's philosophy was an alternative recipe for peace of mind, whereas Arcesilas was interested in what to believe and what to do. He realized that pure scepticism is no more maintainable in practice than absolute pantheism; if one cannot reach truth one must at least take decisions, and after hearing both sides of a question one can at least determine what is the reasonable course of action to pursue. For a virtuous and happy life this is sufficient.

For a hundred years the Academy continued along the course set for it by Arcesilas, but in the middle of the next century it was given a new direction by CARNEADES. This fresh stage was known as the Third or New Academy, though sometimes it is confusingly termed the 'Middle' Academy. With the possible exception of Chrysippus, Carneades was the ablest philosopher between Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. and Plotinus in the third century A.D. He wrote nothing, but his teaching was recorded in the voluminous writings of his disciple CLITOMACHUS, and was well known to Cicero. The formidable Academic attacks on Epicureanism and Stoicism in Books I and III of *The Nature of the Gods* are pretty faithful reproductions of Carneades's arguments. Basically Carneades only continued the work of Arcesilas, but he introduced a shift of emphasis. He was not content simply to

refute all dogmatisms and suspend judgement, leaving it to the individual to do what is 'reasonable' in practical affairs; something more positive is required, not only for purposes of action but also in the intellectual realm. If we cannot have knowledge, surely we can have a lower degree of certainty; if we cannot reach truth, surely we can arrive at probability. So with considerable insight he examined the requirements that go to the making of an assertion of sufficient probability to justify a man in entrusting himself to it for theoretical and practical purposes. Hence the business of philosophy is not simply to expose all systems and suspend judgement, but to examine all systems with a view to getting as near as possible to a semblance of the truth; hence the wording of the last sentence of *The Nature of the Gods*. Although Carneades thought the Stoic arguments for deity would not stand up to examination, he could not find any sure grounds for atheism; for practical purposes he accepted the belief in God as an opinion more or less probable and useful. Cicero explicitly says ([Book III](#), Section 44) that Carneades had no desire to deny that gods exist, and thus his Cotta is in the authentic Carneadean tradition as combining Academic scepticism in theology with religious observance in practice.

On the death of Clitomachus about 110 the headship of the Academy passed to PHILO of Larissa, who retained the position until he fled to Rome in 88 on account of the Mithridatic War. Philo took the positive side of Carneades's teaching a step further by denying that knowledge was impossible of attainment. A sufficiently high degree of probability, he claimed, does give us knowledge, and this enables us to lay a much sounder basis for morality. This new stage was known as the Fourth Academy, and sometimes (confusingly) as the New Academy, as if there had not been enough 'New Academies' already.

Yet another stage was introduced by ANTIOCHUS of Ascalon, a pupil of Philo, who claimed the headship of the Academy from roughly 70 to 50 B.C. In the eclectic fashion of the age, he attempted to combine elements of the Academic, Stoic and Peripatetic philosophies into a single system based on a Platonic foundation. He rejected the scepticism of the 'New Academy' as a sterile deviation from true Platonism mistakenly foisted on the Academy by Arcesilas, and therefore called his school the Old Academy, though it would be less confusing to call it the Fifth Academy. Many former disciples of Philo refused to acknowledge Antiochus's leadership, saying he had simply surrendered to Stoicism. From this schism the Academy never recovered, and (with the possible exception of Plutarch) Cicero is its last literary representative.

Cicero, as explained above, studied under both Philo and Antiochus, but was never happy about Philo's quasi-dogmatic approach to ethics,

still less with Antiochus's rejection of the sceptical method. He remained at heart a pure Carneadean. Yet he had sufficient sympathy with Antiochus's eclecticism to borrow from Stoicism on a substantial scale in his constitutional and ethical writings, and it would seem that he was impressed by some at least of the Stoic proofs of the existence of a god or gods who exercise a providential control over the world.

Peripateticism

The Peripatetics were so called not because they walked about, nor because (as was later supposed) their founder Aristotle walked about while lecturing, but because Aristotle's place of teaching had been in a *peripatos* or covered walk in the Lyceum, a gymnasium at Athens. At Aristotle's death the headship of his school devolved upon the scientist and moralist THEOPHRASTUS (who died in 288); he was succeeded by STRATO (who died in 270), whose chief interest was in the science and philosophy of nature. Arcesilas may have derived his method of dialectical criticism from the Peripatetics; but from the time of Strato onwards this school borrowed more and more ideas from Stoicism, until by Cicero's day there was little difference between the two except that the Peripatetics were true to the spirit of their founder in tempering with common sense some of the more doctrinaire positions of the Stoa. Thus they denied that virtue was the only good thing; they refused to regard the emotions as wholly evil and to be repressed; and they thought that the distinction between the right and the expedient was one of degree, not of kind. The fact that in theology the two schools were in agreement is given in *The Nature of the Gods* (I.16) as the reason for not including a Peripatetic speaker in the dialogue. It is also probable that Cicero was not so well informed about current Peripatetic teaching, and he may have preferred to confine himself to matters with which he was directly acquainted.

The Nature of the Gods has never been among the most popular of Cicero's works, but it has at different times played an interesting part in the history of European thought.

At first Cicero's works were valued principally for their oratorical brilliance, especially under the influence of the great literary critic Quintilian (about A.D. 39–95); but his fame led to the study of all his works, and study of style led on to study of content. By the third

century *The Nature of the Gods* had become an important document in the great struggle of religions for supremacy in the Roman Empire, in which the Christians found it a very useful weapon against the old pagan religion.

It had not always been so. The Church had earlier been warned against the use of Greek philosophy. Tertullian (about A.D. 160–230) had written:

What then has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the Church? Or heretics with Christians? Our instruction comes from the Porch of Solomon [i.e. the Stoa where the Apostles taught, as we read in Acts iii.11 and v.12, and not the Stoa of Zeno].... Beware of those who have devised a Stoic or Platonic or Dialectical Christianity. Once we have Jesus Christ, we need no further curiosity; once we have the gospel, no further inquiry.*

However, it was one thing to use writings like Cicero's as a support for Christian doctrine, it was another thing to use them as a solvent of false religion; if paganism could be refuted out of the mouth of a celebrated pagan author, so much the better. Thus Minucius Felix about the same time wrote a dialogue in Cicero's style and manner, using much of the material in *The Nature of the Gods* to bring contempt on the old Roman religion. But he went beyond that negative use of Cicero: he also used the catalogue of opinions about the gods in [Book I](#), Sections 24–41, not as examples of delusions, but as positive testimony that God exists and is a spirit; and he borrowed the argument in [Book II](#), [Chapter 4](#), that we have only to lift our eyes to the skies to gain an immediate and infallible conviction that nature is governed by a supreme Intelligence.

No doubt other Christian apologists found *The Nature of the Gods* a useful stick to beat their opponents with, for Arnobius near the end of the century mentioned that devout pagans had recently been grumbling that the Roman Senate ought to order the book's destruction because it confirmed the Christian religion and destroyed the authority of antiquity. To which Arnobius himself retorted that if anyone thinks Cicero's works are in error, let him confute them; but a desire to suppress them is not a defence of the gods but a sign of fear of the truth.* Arnobius himself included much material from this treatise of Cicero's in his defence of Christianity. His footsteps were followed by his pupil Firmianus Lactantius (about 260–340), who however was more guarded in his attitude to this particular book. He was quite ready to use any argument from it that would tell specifically against the traditional Roman religion, including material from the parts of [Book III](#) that have since been lost to us; but at the same time he recognized that the book was a double-edged weapon:

The whole of [Book III](#) of *The Nature of the Gods* is fundamentally subversive and

destructive of all religions. What more can we expect? Can we excel Cicero in eloquence? Certainly not; but he was deficient in faith because of ignorance of the truth, as he candidly confesses in the same work. For he says (I.60; also II.2) that it is easier for him to expose falsehood than discover the truth.*

There are not many references to this work in other Christian writings of this period, because after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century there was less need of polemic against paganism and more of instruction in Christian faith and morals; for faith Cicero was of little use, for morals there were other works of his to hand. *The Nature of the Gods* was, however, well known to Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who used some of the arguments in it against pagan religion in the earlier books of his *City of God*; he also borrowed Cicero's derivation of *religio* from *relegere*, 'to read again and again' (II.72), and his accounts of Divine purposiveness in the construction of the human body (II.140–52).†

Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century wanted all Cicero's writings destroyed because the charm of their style diverted young men from reading scripture; they survived, however (or most of them did), and remained known to the educated world. For instance Abelard (early twelfth century) was a great admirer of Cicero. The Italian Renaissance stimulated, and was in turn stimulated by, a revived interest in Cicero; he was greatly admired, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, not only as the perfect stylist, but also as the introducer of philosophy to Latin speech. The great concern of the humanists of this period was to combine eloquence and wisdom, and Cicero had done just that; indeed for a time in the fifteenth century, when the prestige of Aristotle had faded a little and Plato had not yet made his full impact, Cicero was venerated by some as the greatest of the ancients. All this did not, however, bring with it any great use of *The Nature of the Gods*. So long as Christianity was generally accepted, it did not need the support of the Stoic arguments in [Book II](#); if philosophy was needed for elucidation of the faith, Aristotle provided a much profounder and more useful vehicle than anything in Cicero. Those who obstinately disbelieved could be more effectually silenced by compulsion than by arguments from pagan philosophy. And since it was in nobody's interest to explain or defend Christianity in terms of [Book II](#) of *The Nature of the Gods*, equally it was in nobody's interest to attack it in terms of [Book III](#). The Reformation made little difference to this general situation, and it was not until the seventeenth century that renewed interest began to be taken in this particular work of Cicero's.

Four pieces of evidence may be quoted in illustration of what has just been said. First, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century included as the last of his five proofs of the existence of God an

argument from the purposiveness of the created order, but although he had before him all the wealth of examples given by Cicero in [Book II](#) of *The Nature of the Gods*, he preferred instead to use a more abstract argument derived from Aristotle; a similar argument was used by Leibniz (1646–1716) in his *Monadology*, in contrast to some of his English contemporaries who were by then borrowing from Cicero.

A second witness is the anonymous compilation of *Aphorisms Collected from Cicero*, which was printed with the works of Bede in the sixteenth century and was perhaps put together in the fourteenth or fifteenth.* More than a third of these aphorisms are from Cicero's treatise *On Duties*; others are quoted from the *Tusculan Disputations*, *On Friendship*, *On Old Age*, the *Paradoxes*, and *The State*; but from *The Nature of the Gods* not a single one.

Our third illustration is from statistics of book publishing. A rough index of the relative popularity of Cicero's works is to be found in the number of separate editions of each work. Many editions have of course been published of the complete works of Cicero, but it is not until a single work is selected for separate publication that we know there is really a reading public for it. From this it is easy to see that until the end of the seventeenth century there was no great demand for *The Nature of the Gods*. In the fifteenth century only one separate edition of it was printed, as compared with 30 of his book *On Duties*; in the sixteenth century the respective totals were 10 and 153; in the seventeenth century 2 and 34. There was no English edition of *The Nature of the Gods* until 1683. It was not until the eighteenth century that it came into its own: 20 editions were published in that century (including 10 in the British Isles), as compared with 56 of *On Duties*; the respective figures for the period 1801 to 1836 (the year of Orelli's list from which these figures are taken) are 18 and 28. For the whole of the nineteenth century the British Library catalogue lists 13 and 28 editions respectively, to which may be added 7 English translations of *The Nature of the Gods* and only 6 of *On Duties*. Many of these books will have been intended for school use, but it is evident that our present work was not widely read until the eighteenth century; the fifteenth-century favourites were the treatises on *Duties*, *Friendship*, and *Old Age*, *The Dream of Scipio* (about the heavenly reward for the good statesman) and *The Stoic Paradoxes*.

A fourth line of evidence is afforded by the use made of *The Nature of the Gods* by two representative sixteenth-century writers. The partial use made of this work by John Calvin (1509–64) may be taken as typical of the early Reformation. [Book I](#) of his *Institutio* begins by describing the limited knowledge of God which man can have by nature before going on to the special saving knowledge obtainable only through scripture. He quotes Cicero's book in support of his

contention that all men are instinctively religious (Chapter 3.1); and like Augustine he accepts Cicero's derivation of *religio* from *relegere* (12.1): but for the rest, Cicero's book is of value to Calvin only as a museum of human errors. Thus he refers the reader to Cicero's [Book I](#) (Sections 24–41) for examples of the absurdities that even philosophers have invented about the nature of the world (5.11); instead of treating in detail of the puerilities of polytheism he simply refers in general to Books I and II of Cicero's treatise; and the godlessness of Epicureanism is dismissed with a reference to the latter part of Cicero's [Book I](#) (5.12). He makes no use of Cicero at points where he might have brought him in as an ally, for instance when refuting the Epicurean theory of the accidental creation of nature out of atoms (12.4) or the Stoic doctrine of fate (12.8); and in discoursing of God's providential wisdom in the ordering of nature he quotes the testimonies of Aristotle, Macrobius, Boethius, Virgil, Manilius and Plato, but from [Book II](#) of *The Nature of the Gods* not a word.

The other writer worth considering at this point is Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). As a sceptical humanist who nevertheless retained a respect for the traditional religion, he might be expected to make greater use of Cicero in theological controversy than Calvin did; but this is not noticeably so. For instance his long 'Apology for Raimond de Sebonde' (*Essays*, II.12) argues in great detail that animals are just as intelligent as men and that men are not well fitted to arrive at the truth without divine aid; in support of his contentions he quotes many classical authors, including Cicero, and he uses *The Nature of the Gods* equally with other works of Cicero for this purpose, but he does not place special reliance, as he might have done, either on Cicero or on this particular treatise.

The sixteenth century was not without some direct reliance on *The Nature of the Gods*. Sir Thomas More, describing the various religions in chapter 9 of his *Utopia* (1516), relies considerably on [Book I](#) of Cicero's dialogue. John Lyly in *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) has a section entitled *Euphues and Atheos*, in which Atheos begins with a few arguments for atheism, one of which quotes the story of Dionysus's scoffing at the gods from Section 83 of [Book III](#). Euphues, in reply, before setting to work to prove God out of Scripture, quotes almost word for word the four reasons for believing in God given by Cicero out of Cleanthes in [Book II](#), sections 13–15.

Greater use of Cicero's dialogue began to be made in the seventeenth century, when the rationalism that had been transforming science began to be applied in earnest to religion. Against such criticism it was no longer possible to defend Christianity by an appeal to Scripture or to the authority or tradition of the Church. In reply to the new Epicureanism of writers like Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) it

was necessary to use arguments that would appeal to the natural man. A rich vein of such arguments was discovered in *The Nature of the Gods*, and so – rather incongruously – the sceptical disciple of Arcesilas and Carneades was enrolled as the champion of Christianity against unbelief. (How Cicero in Elysium must have chuckled with mirth – or perhaps fumed with indignation – to find himself employed, first to undermine the old Roman religion which he wanted to retain, and then to defend a new religion of which he had never heard!) Two arguments in particular were borrowed for this purpose from Cicero's treatise on the gods: (a) the contention, most strongly stated in [Book II](#), Sections 43–45, that there is in all mankind an innate conception of deity and a natural sense of religion; and (b) the argument, developed at length in [Book II](#), that the facts of the natural world demonstrate the existence of a benevolent Creator and Governor of all things. These two arguments – the very two that had been used fourteen centuries earlier by Minucius Felix – were deployed by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (*De Veritate*, 1624), William Chillingworth (*The Religion of Protestants*, 1638), and Ralph Cudworth (*The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 1678). John Ray made much use of the Stoic arguments in *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691), and also quoted in detail Balbus's refutation of the Epicurean claim that the world came into being through a chance concourse of atoms.

For a time these arguments seemed very convincing, but they were soon to crumble away. First the weakness of argument (a) was shown up by John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) rejected the possibility of there being any innate ideas at all. Locke was not anti-Ciceronian, but it was the sceptical side of Cicero that appealed to him more than the affirmative; it was not for nothing that the title-page of his *Essay* bears the following quotation (in Latin) from *The Nature of the Gods* (I.84):

How much better it would have been to confess your ignorance rather than to sicken us by spouting all this rubbish, which cannot be pleasant even to yourself.

However, Locke still relied on argument (b), which retained its popularity in England throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. Many of the Stoic arguments reproduced by Cicero turned up again in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), which had a great vogue in the first half of the new century. But gradually the enthusiasm for this argument faded away as it was realized that it had been dealt a death-blow in the previous century by David Hume (1711-76).

Hume was the closest British imitator of Cicero's *Nature of the Gods*, both in style and in matter. In 1779 there was published

posthumously his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, in which the speakers are Demea, an orthodox theologian, Cleanthes, the exponent of a natural religion based on reason, and Philo, a sceptic. The choice of names is an obvious tribute to Cicero, Cleanthes reproducing many of the Stoic arguments from [Book II](#), Philo many of the Academic arguments from [Book III](#). The whole working-out of the argument is cleverly slanted in favour of scepticism, but Philo (like Cicero's Cotta) is careful to leave open the possibility of a religion based on revelation, not on reason: 'To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.' At the very end Pamphilus, who reports the dialogue, gives his own verdict: 'I confess that, upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think, that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth.' The resemblance to the final sentence of Cicero's work is unmistakable, though the intention may well have been different; it is probable that (as contended at the end of [section 2](#) above) Cicero was sincere in his profession of a preference for Balbus's argument, whereas it is probable (though some writers have taken a different view) that Hume was a complete sceptic in religion but felt he had to cast his work in dialogue form and pay verbal respect to current religious beliefs because otherwise he could never have got a hearing in eighteenth-century Scotland; even as it was, he never published the book in his lifetime, probably fearing the storm which would break on his head if he did. Lactantius was right: [Book III](#) of Cicero's treatise is really subversive of all religion, and so was the general effect of Hume's argument based on it.

While England may have provided the stage for the most spectacular come-back of Cicero's book, it was not without a revival also on the continent, as is evident from the figures of published editions given above. At least until the end of the seventeenth century Cicero continued to enjoy a reputation for positive theological wisdom, for in 1700 there was presented to the University of Jena a doctoral thesis by J. D. Baier entitled *Cicero Theologus*, which constructed out of Cicero's works a theological system which, though less than Christian, was not incompatible with Christianity; in this work plentiful use was made of *The Nature of the Gods*, especially [Book II](#). Cicero's principal appeal, however, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was to the sceptics and savants. Bayle (1647–1716), Voltaire (1694–1778) and Diderot (1713–84) were impressed by his open-mindedness and lack of dogmatism. Voltaire described *The Nature of the Gods* and the *Tusculan Disputations* as 'the two noblest works that ever were penned by mere human wisdom'. * His friend Frederick the Great (1712–86) carried these two books about with him

on his campaigns. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was so much impressed with Hume's *Dialogues* that he immediately inserted his refutation of the 'argument from design' into his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

The arguments of Hume and Kant amount, in brief, to a demonstration that the observable orderliness and beneficence of nature does not prove the existence of a creator god; it no more than points to an architect working on existent material. Nor does it prove that that architect is either infinitely powerful or infinitely good: on the contrary there are many facts that seem to imply that whatever Being is responsible for ordering the world is limited either in power or in goodness or in both. The 'argument from design' is unconvincing except to those who already believe in God on other grounds. This position has now gained general acceptance, and little reliance is now placed on Stoic arguments of the kind set out in [Book II](#) of Cicero's work. A fresh start has had to be made by those who would argue to God from signs of purposiveness in the universe.

Does this mean that *The Nature of the Gods* is no longer of value? Not unless we think nothing of value that is not directly related to what people happen to be interested in at the moment. Admittedly this work no longer serves a current need as it has done in the past; but it may do so again, and meanwhile it may be read with interest as a mine of curious information about ancient science, religion and philosophy, and as an agreeable and on the whole well-written piece of argumentation. Moreover some at least of the issues discussed are not so far removed from matters of current debate among theologians and philosophers. All that Cicero's discussion needs to bring it up to date is some comment from the two main movements of thought on these questions that have arisen in Europe since Cicero's day – historic Christianity and modern atheism. This may best be done by way of an imaginary continuation of the dialogue. This is not the first time that such a continuation has been written. There was published in 1811 at Bonn (in Latin), and republished at Oxford in 1813, a pretended Book IV of Cicero's treatise 'now for the first time edited from a very old parchment manuscript by P. Seraphinus, of the Order of Friars Minor'. The real author was the classical scholar H. H. Cludius. The book purports to give Cicero's own comments on the preceding discussion. It begins, not implausibly, by making Cicero found religion not on philosophy or reasoning, but on a universal religious consciousness, from which he deduces the basic beliefs common to all or most of mankind. By degrees, however, the argument becomes less and less Ciceronian and more and more Roman Catholic. In order to determine what are these basic beliefs, to secure purity of worship and banish superstition, there will be need of sacred books, a sacred oral tradition

of interpretation, an infallible rule of belief and practice, a sacred council, a teaching priesthood, and a Supreme Pontiff, whose seat will of course be at Rome. Seraphinus's precedent will not be followed in the present case. Instead, the dialogue will be continued by two additional speakers. The result will be found in [Appendix II](#) (pp. 239–51). But first Cicero must be allowed to speak for himself.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

IN every translation there is an element of compromise. A sentence which rolls smoothly in one language may lumber heavily in another. A happy phrase, if literally transposed, may wear a sorry look. The echoes of a single word may well avoid recapture in another tongue.

One can of course choose verbal accuracy at any price, translate each sentence word for word, and so produce a safe but deadly crib. In an opposite extreme, one may throw all scholarly impedimenta overboard, let vocabulary and syntax go, seeking only to preserve in English dress the sense and argument of the original. A dangerous course, which easily degenerates into a lazy and misleading paraphrase. A third method goes beyond translation altogether and creates a new work in the image of the old, as Pope and Chapman did with *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The poetry of Homer may justify such an approach, but it is scarcely applicable to the prose of Cicero: and in any case it postulates in the translator a genius which puts him on an equal footing with the author of his choice.

I have therefore aimed at a real translation in the humbler sense, allowing myself a measure of freedom in the variation of linguistic form, while never with intent departing from the sense and emphasis of the original. Above all, I have tried to make Cicero as readable in English as he was in Latin. It is true that there are passages towards the end of the work in which he falls into a dry and almost telegraphic style: but even here, although the going may be rough, the sense is not obscure.

For this translation I have used the Teubner edition of the text, with some variant readings mentioned in the notes. In an appendix I have added some fragments which appeared to be of interest. References are to sections of the text.

I have been much indebted to Mrs Betty Radice, Mr J. M. Ross and Mr L. C. Hector for many helpful suggestions and to my wife for her encouragement from start to finish. And also to Miss D. M. Begg and Mrs M. Esmonde-Deane for preparation of the typescript.

H. C. P. McGregor
Canterbury
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CICERO

The Nature of the Gods

BOOK I

THERE are many questions in philosophy to which no satisfactory answer has yet been given. But the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all. Yet an answer to this question could shed the clearest light upon the nature of our own minds and also give us the essential guidance which we need in our religion. So various and so contradictory are the opinions of the most learned men on this matter as to persuade one of the truth of the saying that philosophy is the child of ignorance: and that the philosophers of the Academy have been wise in withholding their consent from any proposition that has not been proved. There is nothing worse than a hasty judgement, and nothing could be more unworthy of the dignity and integrity of a philosopher than uncritically to adopt a false opinion or to maintain as certain some theory which has not been fully explored and understood.

As to our own question, most philosophers have affirmed the existence of the gods: and indeed such an assertion is plausible and one to which we are all naturally inclined. Protagoras however professed himself in doubt on the matter, and Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene did not believe them to exist at all. But even among those who assert that gods exist there is such variety and conflict of opinions that it would be tedious to list them all. There are many different theories about the shapes in which the gods appear, about their homes and habitations, about the manner of their life, and all of these theories are the subject of constant dispute among philosophers. But the crux and centre of the argument is the question whether the gods do nothing, care for nothing, and take their ease detached from all concern with the care and government of the world: or whether on the contrary all things have been created and formed by them from the dawn of time, and will be ruled and governed by them to all eternity.

So at the very outset of our inquiry we are faced with fundamental differences of opinion. Unless these differences can be resolved, mankind will continue to live in the grossest error and in ignorance of what they most require to know.

There are and always have been some philosophers who believe that the gods have no concern whatever with the affairs of men. But if this belief is true, what becomes of piety, of reverence and of religion? All the tributes of purity and chastity which men offer to the divinity of the gods are meaningless if the gods are unaware of them and if in

their immortal existence they are oblivious of the human race. If the gods cannot help us, and would not if they could, but care nothing about us, and do not even notice what we do: if in short these immortal beings exert no influence whatever on human affairs, then why should we revere them, honour them or pray to them? Piety like any other virtue cannot long endure in the guise of a mere convention and pretence. When piety goes, religion and sanctity go with it. And when these are gone, there is anarchy and complete confusion in our way of life. Indeed I do not know whether, if our reverence for the gods were lost, we should not also see the end of good faith, of human brotherhood, and even of justice itself, which is the keystone of all the virtues.

There are however other philosophers, great and noble ones at that, who believe that the whole universe is administered and governed by the mind and purpose of the gods: and who believe also that the gods are concerned to make provision for the life of man. The fruits of the earth and all that it bears, the times and the seasons, the changing aspects of the sky, by which everything to which the earth gives birth is grown and ripened; all these they regard as the gifts of the immortal gods to man. They have piled up a mass of evidence to support this view, which we shall later examine. It almost goes to prove that the gods have actually created all such things for the benefit of man. But against this view Carneades has developed many counter-arguments such as would stimulate anybody with an active mind to a desire to look into the truth of the matter for himself. There is no subject on which there is so much difference of opinion among both the learned and the ignorant. But in this medley of conflicting opinions, one thing is certain. Though it is possible that they are all of them false, it is impossible that more than one of them is true.

As to my own position, I think I shall be able to satisfy honest critics and to rebut malicious slanders. Those who slander me may then be sorry for their abuse and the critics may have the pleasure of learning something new. We ought to do our best to enlighten and convince those who criticize us in a friendly way, while rebutting sharply those who slander us with malice.

I see that there has been a great deal of talk about the several philosophical works which I have recently published within a short period. Some have wondered how I have acquired this sudden enthusiasm for philosophy, while others have been curious to know what conclusions I have reached on the problems I have tackled. I have felt too that many have been surprised that I have shown myself most inclined towards a philosophy which seems to them to put out the light and plunge everything into darkness, and have unexpectedly taken up the cudgels on behalf of an abandoned and long-neglected

school of thought.

I have not become a philosopher overnight. I have been much interested and engaged in philosophical studies from my earliest years. And I was often most the philosopher when I seemed least interested in philosophy. Witness my speeches, which are full of philosophical aphorisms, and my friendship with men of learning, who were never absent from our house, as well as those eminent philosophers Diodotus, Philo, Antiochus and Posidonius, who have been my tutors in this subject. If all philosophical maxims must be exemplified in our daily lives, then I believe that both in public and in private I have always acted, reasonably and in accordance with my philosophical beliefs.

If anyone asks what motive has brought me so late in the day to put pen to paper on these matters, then there is nothing which I can more easily explain.* In the first place, I was at leisure with nothing else to do. The state of the nation was such that the government had of necessity been confided to the care and wisdom of a single man. I therefore thought it in the national interest that I should seek to interest our people in philosophy, as it seemed to me a matter of some importance for the dignity and good name of our nation that a subject of such weight and value should have its place in Latin literature. I am the less inclined to regret this attempt, when I see how many others I have stimulated not only to read but also to write about these matters. A number of people who were familiar with Greek culture could not previously communicate what they had learnt to their fellow-citizens because they did not feel able to express in Latin what they had studied in Greek. But in this field we now seem to have made such progress that in vocabulary at least we are on equal terms.

I was also moved to these studies by my own sickness of mind and heart, crushed and shaken as I was by the great misfortune which I had to bear.† So I betook myself to this cure, not knowing what better remedy could be found. And the best way in which I could make use of it was not merely to read the works of others but to devote myself to an attempt to explain all the problems of philosophy. We can best understand each branch and division of it, if we try to deal in writing with all the questions which arise. There is a wonderful continuity and progression in all things, so that the one is bound up with the other, and all are linked one with another in a single chain.

Those who ask for my own opinion on every question merely show excessive curiosity. In a discussion of this kind our interest should be centred not on the weight of the authority but on the weight of the argument. Indeed the authority of those who set out to teach is often an impediment to those who wish to learn. They cease to use their own judgement and regard as gospel whatever is put forward by their

chosen teacher. For this reason I have never been able to approve what we are told about the Pythagoreans. It is said that if they made any assertion in discussion, and were asked the reason for it, they would always reply: 'The master said it', the master being Pythagoras himself. Here we see an absolute prejudgement of the issue, so that authority prevails without any argument at all.

In my own four books on the Academic philosophy, I think I have given a sufficient answer to those who wonder why I follow this school of thought. I have not just come to the defence of an abandoned and neglected theory. When men die it does not mean that their opinions are also dead, although they may now lack the living light which their first discoverers could shed upon them. The Academic method of philosophy (which is critical of everything and affirms nothing) was introduced by Socrates, revived by Arcesilas and reinforced by Carneades. It has survived in full vigour to our own day, although I understand that in Greece itself it is now something of an orphan child. But this I ascribe not to any defect in the Academy but to the stupidity of the public. If it is valuable to follow out a single line of argument, how much more valuable must it be to follow out all of them? This is what the Academy seeks to do, since its object is to discover the truth, stating the arguments both for and against all philosophic theories. This is a long and difficult task, and I do not flatter myself that I have fully accomplished it : but I can say that I have tried.

We who philosophize by this method are not just chasing shadows. I have dealt more fully and more generally with this point elsewhere,* but as some persons persist in their un-teachable stupidity, I have to keep on ramming it home. We of the Academy are not people who will accept *nothing* as true. But we do hold that every true perception has in it an admixture of falsehood so similar to the truth that we have no certain criterion of judgement and assent.† It follows that we can attain only to a number of probable truths, which although they cannot be proved as certainties, yet may appear so clear and convincing that a wise man may well adopt them as a rule of life.

To absolve myself of any prejudice, I shall first set out the views of the philosophers on the nature of the gods. On this question the whole world must sit in judgement and decide for themselves which of these views is true. I should be ready to admit the philosophy of the Academy to be a shameless fraud, if everyone were in agreement or if anyone could say for certain what was the truth. So I may well take my cue from the comedy of *The Young Companions*,‡ and say 'O ye gods, I beg you, all you young men and fellow citizens, I call on you, I beseech you, I pray and implore you' – and not about some trifling matter, such as the complaint of the young man in the play that things

have come to a pretty pass when 'a courtesan refuses the presents of a friend who loves her'.

No, I am asking everyone to come into court, weigh up the evidence, and return their verdict as to what we are to say about religion, piety, sanctity, ritual, faith, the taking of oaths; about our temples, our shrines, our solemn sacrifices, even about the auspices over which I myself preside.* All these things depend upon the question of the existence and nature of the immortal gods. Surely even those who believe that they have attained certainty in these matters must feel some doubts when they see how widely wise men have differed about so crucial a question.

I have seen this often but especially when I took part recently in a closely reasoned and rigorous discussion about the divinity of the gods at the house of my friend Gaius Cotta. I had gone to call on him during the Latin Festival at his own request and invitation, and found him sitting in the hall in discussion with the senator Gaius Velleius, who was at that time considered by the Epicureans to be their greatest Roman representative. Quintus Lucilius Balbus was also there, who was such an expert in the Stoic philosophy that he was compared with the leading Greek exponents of that school.

When Cotta saw me, he said, 'You have come just at the right time. I am involved in an argument with Velleius here on a most important subject which will interest a person like yourself, who has made a study of philosophy.'

'As you say,' I replied, 'I do seem to have come at the right time. I see that we have present three authorities from three schools of thought. If only Marcus Piso were also here, no reputable philosophy would lack its spokesman.'

'Well,' said Cotta, 'if the good Antiochus is telling the truth in that book of his which he recently dedicated to Balbus here, there is no need for you to feel the absence of your friend Piso. Antiochus believes that the philosophy of the Stoics and the Peripatetics are essentially the same and that their differences are only verbal.'

'Incidentally I should be glad to know, Balbus, what you think about this book.'

'I am astonished,' he replied, 'that a man with a mind as keen as Antiochus cannot see that there is a great difference between the Stoics, who are primarily concerned to distinguish, in fact and not in words only, between what is right and what is merely expedient: and the Peripatetics, who mix up the two, and make them out to differ only in quantity or degree and not in kind. This is not a small verbal variation, but a fundamental difference of principle. But we can discuss this some other time. Let us now, if you agree, continue with

the argument we had begun.'

'By all means,' said Cotta, 'but our friend who has just arrived' (and here he glanced at me) 'must first be put into the picture. We were discussing the nature of the gods. And as this has always seemed to me something of a mystery, I was asking Velleius to explain to me the views of Epicurus on the subject. And so, Velleius, if it is not too much trouble, perhaps you would recapitulate what you had told us before Cicero arrived.'

'Certainly,' said Velleius, 'although our friend comes as a reinforcement for your side rather than for mine. Both of you,' he said with a smile, 'have been taught by Philo that all our knowledge is only the knowledge of our own ignorance.'

'Let Cotta judge what we have learnt from Philo,' said I, 'but for my part, do not imagine that I have come here to be anyone's ally. I have come only as a listener, who is impartial and unprejudiced in the matter, and under no obligation to defend willy-nilly the truth of any particular opinion.'

Then up spoke Velleius, with all the confidence of men of his school (whose only anxiety is lest they may seem to be in doubt on any point), as if he had himself just returned to earth from some council of the gods held in one of those abodes of theirs 'between the worlds' which Epicurus talks about.* 'Listen,' said he. 'From me you will get no mere figments of the imagination, such as the god whom Plato describes in his *Timaeus* as the creator and artificer of the world, or the fortune-telling old witch whom the Stoics call Providence, or some theory of the universe being itself endowed with mind and senses, a sort of spherical, incandescent and revolving god. All such marvels and monstrosities as these are not philosophy but merely dreams.'

'How could your friend Plato in his mind's eye comprehend so vast a piece of architecture as the building of a universe, and how God laboured to create it? How did he think God went about it? What tools did he use? What levers? What machines? Who assisted him in so vast an enterprise? And how came air and fire and earth and water to serve and obey the will of this creator? And whence sprang those five archetypal shapes† of his, from which everything else was derived, so neatly devised to influence the mind and stimulate the senses? It would be tedious to say more, for it is all the stuff of dreams rather than the search for truth.'

'Most ridiculous of all, Plato first presents us with a world which has not only had a beginning but is actually a sort of manufactured article, and then asserts that it will endure for ever! A man must have the merest smattering of natural science who can imagine that anything which has had a beginning will not also have an end. For

what composite substance is there which cannot be dissolved? What is there which can have a beginning but no end? And as for your "Providence", Lucilius, if she is like Plato's god, then I ask again what agents and machines she used, what was the whole scope and method of the work? But if she is not the same, then I ask why she made a world subject to time, and not, as did Plato's god, a world to last for ever.

'I ask you both, why did these creators of the world suddenly wake up, after apparently having been asleep from time immemorial? Even if there was then no world, time must still have been passing. Time, I say, and not those periods of time which are measured by the number of nights and days in the course of a year. I admit that these depend upon the circular movement of the world. But from all eternity there has been an infinite time, unmeasurable by any periodical divisions. This we can understand from the analogy of space. But we cannot even conceive that once upon a time there was no time at all.

'So I ask you, Balbus, why that "Providence" of yours remained quiescent through that mighty lapse of time? Was she work-shy? But work has no terrors for God, since all the natural elements, sky and fire and earth and sea, obey his divine power. Why should God in any case wish to decorate the universe with lights and signs, like some Minister of Public Works? Was it so that he could live in it himself? If so I suppose he had previously always lived in darkness, like a pauper in a hovel? Or are we to suppose that he only later acquired a taste for variety, and so embellished heaven and earth just as they now appear? But what pleasure would God find in this? And if it did please him, then why did he so long forgo the pleasure? Or was it for the benefit of mankind, as you tend to say, that God created all these things? For the benefit of the wise perhaps? In that case never was so much undertaken for the sake of so few. Then for the benefit of fools? But why should God put himself out for people who do not deserve it? And in any case what would be the point? All foolish people are bound to be unhappy: their own folly will usually see to that. There is nothing like folly to beget misery. But also because there is much unpleasantness in life, which wise men are able to alleviate by the compensation of the good things which they can enjoy. But a fool can neither escape the future nor endure the present.

'As for those who say that the world itself is a conscious intelligence, they have not grasped the nature of consciousness, or understood in what shape it can be manifest. I shall say something about this a little later. At present I would only express my astonishment at the stupidity of those who say that the universe itself is a conscious and immortal being, divinely blest, and then say that it is a sphere, because Plato thought this to be the most beautiful of all

shapes. I for one find more beauty in the shape of a cylinder, a square, a cone or a pyramid.

‘What sort of consciousness do they attribute to this spherical god of theirs? They say that the sphere revolves with a speed which to us is inconceivable. In which case I do not see how it can be the abode of a constant mind and a life of divine beatitude. Any spinning movement affecting any smallest part of our own bodies is unpleasant: so why would it not be unpleasant to a god?

‘Then again the earth, as it is part of the universe, would also be a part of this god. But we see vast expanses of the earth which are uninhabitable deserts. Some of these are scorched by the too near approach of the sun, others through its remoteness are frozen up with frost and snow. But if the world is a god, and these deserts are parts of the world, it must follow that god is roasted in one part and frozen in another.

‘So much for your views, Lucilius: as for the others,* let us start from the earliest philosopher of all, Thales of Miletus, who was the first to consider such questions. Thales said that everything originated from water; and that from water the mind of God created all things. But if the gods have no need of the sensible world, why mix up mind with water and water with mind, if mind can exist by itself without any need of matter?

‘Then there was the view of Anaximander, that gods come into being who wax and wane over long periods and that the being of these gods itself makes up the substance of innumerable worlds. But can we conceive of a god who does not endure for ever?

‘Next came Anaximines, who held that God was to be found in the air: that he had come into being, was vast and infinite, and always in motion. But how could formless air be a god, when surely God must have not merely some form but the most beautiful form of all? And how could anything which has at some time come into being not participate in our mortality?

‘Then came Anaxagoras, the pupil of Anaximines, who was the first to maintain that the form and motion of the universe was determined and directed by the power and purpose of an infinite intelligence. But he did not see that no continuing motion, which is involved with sensation, can be a part of an infinite consciousness: and that there could not be a sensation the influence of which would not be felt throughout the whole natural world. But if he imagined this infinite mind as a sort of living creature, it must have some inner principle from which it draws its life. But what other inner principle can there be than mind itself? Then is it to be clothed with an external body? No: this apparently was not his view. But mind in its naked purity,

without any organs of sense, seems to be something which cannot be comprehended by any power or category of our intelligence.

‘Then there was Alcmaeon of Croton, who attributed divinity to the sun, moon and stars, and also to the soul, not realizing that he was attributing immortality to mortal things.

‘Then came Pythagoras, who held that mind was present and active throughout the whole universe and that our own minds were a part of it, but did not see that through the division of human minds the divine mind would be itself divided and distraught: and that when human minds were unhappy (as happens all too often) a part of the divine mind would be made unhappy too. But such a thing is impossible. And how could the human mind not be omniscient, if it were a part of the divine mind? And how could this divine mind, if it is nothing but pure spirit, be infused and imprisoned in the world?

‘Then we have Xenophanes, who considered that the whole infinite universe of mind and matter together constituted the divine being. But he was as much in error about the nature of mind as were the others, and still more in error about the nature of the infinite, in which there can be no composition and no consciousness.

‘Then Parmenides produced his fiction of the “Corona” (“Stephane” in the Greek) – a sort of unbroken ring of light and fire around the sky, which he calls “God”, although there is not a trace to be seen in it of the form or consciousness of a divine being. And this is not his only absurdity, for he involves his god in war, dissension, lust and suchlike, all of which are obliterated in the end by disease, or sleep, or the oblivion of age. And as for what he says about the stars, I shall not discuss it here, for I have already refuted it elsewhere.

‘Empedocles is at fault on many subjects, but his worst error is his conception of the gods. He will have it that there are four divine substances, from which all things are created. But it is obvious that any such substances must merely come into being and pass away again, and can have no conscious life.

‘And as for Protagoras, he seems to have had no ideas at all about the nature of the gods and disclaimed altogether any certain knowledge whether they existed or not, or in what form.

‘Then there was Democritus, who was also entirely at sea. He attributed divinity to all his transient “images” and then also to the underlying substance which emits and pours out these “images”, as well as to our own knowledge and intelligence. His error was the greater because he denied that anything ever remained fixed and constant, so that nothing could be eternal. In so doing he left no room for the divine or for any opinions about it.

‘Diogenes of Apollonia thought that the air was divine, but how

could air have either the form or consciousness of a god?

‘It would be wearisome to enumerate all the inconsistencies of Plato on this subject. In his *Timaeus* he says that it is impossible to name a god as the father of the world: * while in *The Laws* he considers it improper to inquire at all into the nature of deity. He holds God to be without a body, immaterial: but this is an incomprehensible idea. Such a god would inevitably lack any consciousness, any wisdom and any pleasure, all of which are bound up in our idea of God. Yet both in the *Timaeus* and in *The Laws* he identifies God with the universe, the heavens, the stars, the earth and the soul, as well as the gods whose worship has been handed down to us by our ancestors. All this is obviously nonsense in itself as well as being self-contradictory.

‘Xenophon repeats almost the same errors in fewer words. In his reminiscences of the sayings of Socrates, he makes Socrates argue that we ought not to inquire into the nature of God: that the sun and the souls of men share the divine nature: and sometimes say that there is one, and at other times many gods. All of which involves much the same errors as those which I have noted in my remarks on Plato.

‘Antisthenes too, in his book *The Natural Philosopher*, destroys the power and character of the gods by saying that although popular religion recognizes many gods there is only one God, which is Nature.

‘Similarly Speusippus, following his uncle Plato, held that all things were governed by some kind of animal force, and tried to eradicate from our minds any notion of the gods.

‘Aristotle too in the third of his three books on philosophy is very confused, and at loggerheads with his master Plato. In one place he attributes divinity to mind only: in another he says that the universe itself is God: and in another he sets a god above the universe, and endows this god with a power to govern and conserve in its orbit the motion of the world by a sort of counter-rotation. * Then again he calls the fiery sky a god, not perceiving that the sky is merely a part of that same world the whole of which in another place he has already identified with God. In any case how could the sky in its swift revolutions preserve the consciousness of a god? And where is to be the place of abode of the gods, if the heavens are themselves to be counted as a god? Aristotle will have this god also to be bodiless, and so deprives him of all consciousness and wisdom. And how can this universal god have motion, if he is bodiless? And if he is always in motion, how can he be happy and at peace?

‘His schoolfellow Xenocrates is no wiser in this respect. In his books on the nature of the gods we are told nothing about their form of being. He says there are eight gods. Five he identifies with the five planets. One he assembles from all the fixed stars, making up as it

were a single god from a miscellany of parts. He adds the sun as a seventh and the moon as an eighth, although it is incomprehensible how these can in any way be blest with consciousness.

‘Heraclides of Pontus, another of the Platonic school, stuffs his work full of childish tales. First he says mind is divine, then the whole universe. He attributes divinity to the planets, and so deprives God of consciousness and endows him with a variable shape. In the same book he numbers earth and sky among the gods.

Theophrastus too is intolerably inconsistent. First he gives divine primacy to mind, then to the sky, then to the stars and constellations.

‘Nor need we pay much attention to his disciple Strato, the so-called natural scientist, who thought that all divine power was to be sought in nature, which may indeed provide the forces of birth, growth and decay but lacks any specific form or conscious purpose.

‘But Zeno – and I come now, Balbus, to the men of your school – Zeno thought that God was to be found in the law of nature, which is powerful to enforce what is right and to forbid transgressions. But how one can attribute life to a law, nobody can understand. And God must surely be a living god! Then in another place he identifies the aether with God. But once again what are we to make of a god without consciousness, who can never come to meet us in our prayers, our wishes and our vows? In other works, he takes the view that the divine power is to be found in a principle of reason which pervades the whole of nature. He attributes such power to the stars, and even to the months and years and changing seasons. In his interpretation of the *Theogony* of Hesiod, on the origin of the gods, Zeno ignores all our natural or acquired beliefs about the gods, and banishes Jupiter, Juno and Vesta, and all these persons, from the company of the gods, arguing that these were merely names given symbolically to mute and inanimate forces.

‘The opinions of his pupil Aristo are equally mistaken, who holds that we cannot comprehend the form of God and denies the gods all conscious life. Indeed he doubts whether God is a living being at all.

‘Cleanthes, who was another pupil of Zeno, says that the universe itself is God, and then goes on to give this name to the mind and spirit which animates the whole of nature. Finally he finds the supreme godhead in the encircling fire of the upper air, which we call the aether: for this is both the deepest and the highest, surrounding all things in all directions.

‘Cleanthes becomes almost insane in those books which he has written against the pursuit of pleasure, for in these he first imagines the gods to have some shape and visible appearance: then he attributes all divine power to the stars: and finally comes the

conclusion that nothing is more divine than reason itself.

‘And so it comes about in the works of all these men that the God whom we know in our minds, and whose impression we would wish to be imprinted in our souls, completely disappears.

‘Persaeus, another pupil of this same Zeno, says that those persons who have made important discoveries for the improvement of our lives have been recognized as gods: and that even useful and beneficial inventions have themselves been named as divine, so that he is in fact saying that they were not merely the inventions of gods but gods in their own right. But could anything be more absurd than to accord divine honours to our own sordid and ugly contrivances, or to enrol dead men in the company of the gods, so that religion becomes a sort of perpetual period of mourning?

‘Then there is Chrysippus, who is regarded as the most ingenious interpreter of these Stoic dreams. He gets together a great assembly of unknown gods, so unknown, in fact, that we are at a loss even to conjecture what manner of beings they are, in spite of the power of human imagination to picture almost anything in thought. He affirms that the divine power is to be found in reason, and in a mind and consciousness which pervades the whole universe. He says in fact that the universe itself is God, or an emanation of the divine mind. Or again he speaks of the government of the universe as the operation of a rational intelligence and of a universal common nature which embraces all things. He speaks also of the power of fate and of the predetermined future: but elsewhere he is back with fire and the upper air of which I spoke earlier. Then he goes on to deify the whole flux and flow of the natural world, water, earth, air, sun, moon, stars, the universe itself of which all these are part, and even men who have attained to immortality. He also argues that when we speak of Jupiter, we mean the aether. When we speak of Ceres, we mean the earth: and similarly with the names of all the other gods. Then he identifies Jupiter with the power of eternal and immutable law, which guides our lives and directs our efforts. This law he further identifies with the necessity of fate and the eternal predetermination of all that is to come. But none of this would seem to be of a nature to express the power of God. All this you will find in the first book of his treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*. In the second book he tries to reconcile the tales of Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer with what he has said in the first. In this way the most ancient of our poets, who never dreamt of such a thing, are converted into Stoics unawares! In this he is followed by Diogenes of Babylon in his book *Minerva*, as when he detaches from the story of Jupiter the episode of the virgin’s birth, and explains it all in terms of natural science.

‘So far I have been dealing in a general way not so much with the

opinions of philosophers as with the fantasies of lunatics, which are nearly as absurd as the poisonous honey of the poets, who present us with gods afire with rage or mad with lust, and make us the spectators of their wars, their battles, their violence and wounds; of their hates, quarrels, altercations; and also of their births and deaths, their complaints and lamentations, their lusts erupting into excess of every kind, adultery, captivity, and intercourse with human beings, so that mortals may have gods for parents. To these fictions of the poets we may add the wonders of the magicians, and the similar extravagances of the Egyptians. Not to mention the superstitions of the masses, which are consistent only in their ignorance of the truth.

‘Anyone who considers how rash and foolish are all these beliefs ought to admire Epicurus and to include him in the list of those divine beings whose nature we are discussing.* He alone saw that gods must exist because nature herself has imprinted an idea of them in the minds of all mankind. What race of men or nation is there which does not have some untaught apprehension of the gods? Such an innate idea Epicurus calls “prolepsis”, that is to say, a certain form of knowledge which is inborn in the mind, and without which there can be no other knowledge, no rational thought or argument. The force and value of this doctrine we can see from his own inspired work on *The Standard of Judgement*.

‘So you see that the foundation-stone of our inquiry has been well laid. This is not a belief which has been prescribed to us by some authority, or law, or custom: it rests rather upon a firm and continuing consensus of opinion that we must admit the existence of the gods because this knowledge is implanted in our minds from birth. And an idea that by its nature commands universal agreement must be true. We must therefore admit that there are gods. Indeed the truth of this is almost universally admitted not only by philosophers but by the common man also, so let us take it as agreed that we have a preconception or “an innate idea” (as I have called it) or a prior knowledge of the divine. New concepts demand new terms, just as Epicurus called this innate idea “prolepsis”, a term which had never been used in this sense before. This innate idea is such as to cause us also to think of the gods as happy and immortal. The same nature which has given us knowledge of the existence of the gods has also imprinted in our minds a belief in their blessedness and immortality. If this is so, the famous maxim of Epicurus is true, that “whatever is blessed and eternal must itself be free from care, and cause no care to others, and so must be untouched by anger or by affection. For all such things are signs of weakness.”

‘If we were seeking only in piety to reverence the gods and to free ourselves from superstition, then I should have said enough. The gods

in their grandeur will be revered and worshipped by mankind, if they are recognized as blessed and immortal, for every excellence inspires a proper reverence. We would also have banished all fear of the power and anger of the gods, once we had understood that a blessed and immortal being knows nothing of anger or of affection. And when these are gone, what is left for us to fear from the powers above?

‘But further to confirm these beliefs, the mind seeks to know the shape and form of the gods, their way of life, and the thought and movement of their minds.

‘As to the form and shape of the gods, we have both the prompting of nature and our reason to guide us. By the prompting of nature all of us of every race can conceive the gods only in human form. In what other form have they ever appeared to anyone, either awake or in his dreams? But we need not rely entirely on such instinctive ideas: reason herself leads us to the same conclusion. It seems fitting that beings of the highest excellence, happy and eternal, should also be most beautiful: and what disposition of the limbs, what harmony of features, what shape and form could be more beautiful than the human? You Stoics, Lucilius, are accustomed – unlike our friend Cotta, who oscillates from one opinion to another – you Stoics are accustomed to illustrate the skill of the divine artificer by explaining how everything about the human form is apt both for our use and pleasure. But if the human form excels the shape of all other living beings, as the gods too are living beings, their shape and form must be the most beautiful of all. As we all agree that the gods are happy, and no happiness is possible without virtue: and there is no virtue without reason: and reason is associated only with the human form: then it must follow that the gods themselves have human shape. This shape is not a body, but analogous to a body. It has no blood, but something analogous to blood.

‘All this has been so deeply thought out and so subtly expounded by Epicurus that not everybody can understand it. However, I shall rely on your intelligence to let me explain it more summarily than the argument deserves.

‘Epicurus, who not only sees with his reason obscure and deeply buried truths, but seems almost to hold them in his hands, teaches us that the living essence of the gods is something that we must first perceive not with our senses but with our reason. These are not material bodies, which can be counted, as though they were solid objects: but are rather images perceived in fleeting likenesses. As infinite kinds of almost identical images arise continually from the innumerable atoms and flow out to us from the gods,* so we should take the keenest pleasure in turning and bending our mind and reason to grasp these images, in order to understand the nature of these

blessed and eternal beings.

‘In truth the supreme power of the infinite is of all things the most worthy of our deep and steady contemplation. We must understand that it is the nature of the infinite to give birth to an equal and universal correspondence among all things. This is what Epicurus calls “isonomia”, that is to say, the law of equal distribution. From this law it follows that since there is so great a number of mortal beings, there must be no less a number of immortal gods: and that if the powers of destruction are innumerable, then the powers of conservation must also be infinite.

‘You are fond of asking us, Balbus, what is the way of life of the gods and how their time is spent. Clearly it must be the happiest life which we can imagine and the richest in all good things. A god has no business to transact: he is involved in no activity: he labours at no tasks: he rejoices only in his own wisdom and holiness: and he has the certainty of perfect and eternal bliss.

‘We have rightly said that a divine being is a happy being, but you involve him in all manner of vexation. If God and the universe are one and the same, what manner of existence could be less peaceful than to be in constant revolution at incredible speed about the axis of the world? There is no happiness save in repose. If on the other hand God dwells in the universe as its ruler and governor, and rules the stars in their courses, and the changing seasons, and all the varying sequences of nature, looking down on earth and sea, and protecting the life and goods of men, then he must be involved in all kinds of troublesome and laborious affairs. But we define the happy life as peace of mind and freedom from all care.

‘Our master has taught us that the world was made by a natural process, without any need of a creator: and that this process, which you say can only be effected by divine wisdom, in fact comes about so easily that nature has created, is creating, and will create, worlds without end. But as you cannot see how nature can do this without the intervention of mind, you follow the example of our tragic playwrights, and take refuge in a divine intervention to unravel the intricacies of your plot.* You would have no need of such divine handiwork, if you would only consider the infinite immensity of boundless space in all directions. The mind may plunge into space and in thought traverse it far and wide, yet never find that further shore where it may come to rest. In this immensity of breadth and length and height there swarms the infinite power of atoms beyond number. And although they move in a vacuum, they cohere amongst themselves, and then are held together by a mutual attraction. Thus are created all the shapes and forms of nature, which you imagine can only be created by some divine blacksmith with his anvil and his

bellows! So you have smuggled into our minds the idea of some eternal overlord, whom we must fear by day and night. Who would not fear a god who foresees everything, ponders everything, notices everything? A god who makes everything his own concern, a curious god, a universal busybody?

‘Hence first arises your idea of predestination, by which you argue that every event follows inevitably from eternal laws and the resultant sequence of cause and effect. But what worth can we allow to a philosophy which ascribes everything to the power of fate? A philosophy worthy only of old women, and ignorant ones at that! Then comes your cult of prophecy: and if we were to listen to you, we should be so steeped in superstition that we should be full of reverence for soothsayers, seers, prophets, diviners and every charlatan who will read for us the riddles of our dreams.

‘Epicurus has saved us from all such fears and set us free, so that we have no terror of the gods, whom we know neither devise any mischief for themselves nor seek to bring it upon others. And so with reverence and awe we worship them in their divine perfection.

‘My enthusiasm for my subject has, I fear, led me to speak too long, but it was hard for me to leave unfinished the exposition of so vast and so sublime a theme, although really it was for me to listen to others rather than to speak myself.’

‘Well now, Velleius,’ said Cotta, with his usual courtesy, ‘if you had not spoken as you have, I for my part should certainly have said nothing. I am one of those people who can more easily see why something is false than why it is true. As usual this was what happened when I was listening to you just now. You may ask me, what is my own opinion of the nature of the gods? Perhaps my answer will be that I have none. You may then ask whether I accept the opinions which you have yourself expounded. And in that case I must say that I cannot accept them at all.

‘But before I come to an examination of your arguments, let me first express my personal feelings towards you. I have been often told by your friend Lucius Crassus that he thought you without doubt the best exponent of the Epicurean philosophy in Rome, and that there were not many from Greece itself who could compare with you. As I was aware of the remarkable affection which he has for you, I thought until now that favouritism lent some exaggeration to his praise. But now, reluctant as I am to praise you to your face, I must say that you have given us a most lucid exposition of a most difficult and doubtful subject. Not only were you copious in references to your authorities, but you displayed also an elegance of style not often found in men of your school.

‘When I was in Athens, I often heard Zeno, whom our good Philo used to call the standard-bearer of the Epicureans. Indeed it was at Philo’s suggestion that I went to hear him. It was Philo’s intention, I believe, that I would be better able to judge how conclusively these Epicurean views could be refuted if I had heard them expounded by their leader himself. Zeno, too, did not speak as most of the others do, but spoke as you do, clearly, impressively and with distinction. But when I was listening to you I had the same experience as I often had when listening to him. I was almost angry, if you will forgive me, that a person of such intelligence should have become converted to opinions which seem to me not only irresponsible but ridiculous as well. Not that I am myself now going to advance some better theory. For, as I said before, in almost everything, and especially in questions of natural philosophy, I can more easily tell you what is false than what is true.

‘So if you ask me, what is the nature and character of a divine being? I shall appeal for my answer to the authority of Simonides. When the tyrant Hiero put this question to him, he asked for a day’s grace in which to consider it. Then when Hiero asked him again the next day, he pleaded for another two days’ grace. And when he kept on doubling the number of days of grace in this way, Hiero became curious and asked him why he kept begging for more and more time. “Because the longer I ponder your question,” he said, “the more unable I am to answer it.” Now Simonides was not only a delightful poet, but is also said to have been a wise and well-informed man in every way. So I would conjecture that so many shrewd and subtle answers occurred to him that he could not decide which was the nearest to the truth and so despaired of ever getting at the truth at all.

‘But that Epicurus of yours – for I would rather argue with him than with you – never said anything that could claim to be common sense, let alone philosophy.

‘In this subject of the nature of the gods the first question is: do the gods exist or do they not? It is difficult, you will say, to deny that they exist. I would agree, if we were arguing the matter in a public assembly, but in a private discussion of this kind it is perfectly easy to do so. Now I myself hold a religious office, and believe that public religious worship and ritual ought to be reverently observed: so that I could wish to be certainly persuaded on this first question, that the gods exist, as a matter of fact and not of faith. I confess that many doubts arise to perplex me about this, so that at times I wonder whether they exist at all. But I will meet you half way. I shall not attack you on assertions such as this, in which you are in agreement with the other schools of philosophy. Almost all philosophers agree – and I as much as any – that gods exist. I will not dispute this. But I

challenge the cogency of the arguments which you have adduced to prove it.

‘You say that it is a sufficient proof of the existence of the gods that men of all races and of all nations believe in them. But such an argument is both false and frivolous. In the first place, how do you know the opinions of all mankind? I would think that there must be many wild and primitive peoples who have no idea of the gods at all. And what about the atheist Diagoras, and after him Theodorus, both of whom openly deny that any gods exist? Then there was Protagoras of Abdera, whom you mentioned just now, the greatest sophist of his time. In the introduction to one of his books he wrote that he was not able to say whether the gods existed or not. For this he was banished by public decree from the city and land of Athens, and his works were burnt in public. I suspect that his example made others more reluctant to express such sentiments, when they saw that even agnosticism could not escape such penalties. And what about the temple-robbers and the blasphemers and the perjurers? As Lucilius says, “if Lucius Tubulus or Lupus or Carbo – or some such son of Neptune”^{*} – had believed in the existence of the gods, could they have been such liars and such libertines?

‘This argument is therefore not as soundly based as would appear necessary to prove what you would have it prove. But as it is an argument which other philosophers also use, I shall let it go for the present, and consider rather those arguments which are your own. I will concede that the gods exist. Now tell me then whence they come, where they are, what is their body and mind and way of life? These are the things I want to know. Your answer to every question is to appeal to the power and the licence of the atom. From these you shape and construct the whole creation. But to start with, these atoms do not exist. A thing that has no mass is nothing. In the second place the whole of space is filled with matter, from which it follows there can be no void and no individual atoms.

‘Here I am merely delivering the oracles of the physicists and I have myself no idea whether they are true or false, but at any rate they are more plausible than yours. I am thinking for instance of the fallacious theory of Democritus – or was it his predecessor Leucippus? – which would have us believe only in minute particles, some rough, some smooth, some rounded, some angular and some curved and some even fitted with a kind of hook: and that from these particles have been created the heavens and the earth, not by any natural force but merely by a sort of accidental collision! And you, Gaius Velleius, still cling to this theory even at your time of life. Indeed, I believe it would be easier to persuade you to change your whole way of life than to wean you from this dogma. You had decided that you ought to be an

Epicurean long before you knew anything about this theory. So you had no choice but to force your mind to accept this monstrosity or give up your claim to be an Epicurean at all. At what price would you cease to be one? I know your answer: "Not at the price of a truth, which has shown me the way to peace of mind." This nonsense you call "truth"? I shall not argue with you about "peace of mind" – a quality which you will not concede even to a god unless he is manifestly lapped in idleness. But where is this "truth" of yours to be found? Among the innumerable universes, born and dying through every instant of time? Or in the separate particles which you say produce these wondrous works, without the guidance of nature or of reason?

'But I am ranging too wide and forgetting that a little while ago I promised to be easy with you. I shall admit for argument's sake that everything is made of atoms. But how does this help us to answer our question about the nature of the gods? Presumably the gods too are made of atoms. Then in that case they are not eternal. For whatever is made up of atoms must have come into being at some point of time. But if this is so, there must have been a time when there were no gods, because they had not yet come into being.

'If the gods have a beginning, then they must also have an end, as you yourself argued just now about the universe of Plato. So how can they enjoy that eternal happiness which you invoke as the touchstone of divinity? To escape this dilemma you go creeping into thickets of casuistry, saying that a god has no body, but something like a body, and no blood but something similar to blood.

'It is a favourite trick of yours, when you wish to escape criticism of some implausible proposition, to drag in another which is downright impossible, although you would do better to concede the point at issue rather than put up so ridiculous a defence. Epicurus himself used to do the same thing. For instance, he saw that if those atoms of his were always falling downwards by their own weight, their motion would be fixed and predetermined, and there would be no room for free will in the world. So casting about for a way to avoid this determinism, which Democritus had apparently overlooked, he said that the atoms, as they fell, just swerved a little! But to put forward a proposition like this was worse than to surrender his original position. He did the same sort of thing in his argument with the logicians: it is an axiom of the traditional logic that in every disjunctive proposition of the form "X either is... or is not..." one of the alternatives must be true. He was afraid that if he admitted anything of this sort, then in a proposition such as "Tomorrow Epicurus will either be alive or he will not be alive" one or other of the statements would be a *necessary* truth: so to avoid this he denied that there was any logical necessity at all in a

disjunctive proposition, which is too stupid for words! Arcesilas used to criticize Zeno because while he himself held that all that we perceive through our senses is false, Zeno held that some only of our sense-perceptions were false, but others true. But Epicurus was afraid that if any of our sense-perceptions were false, then none of them could be true: and so he asserted that all our senses were always “the messengers of truth”. All such arguments were most ill-considered. He was merely warding off a pat by exposing himself to a punch. But he does the same thing as regards the question of the nature of the gods. He wishes to avoid saying that they are composed of material parts, as it would then follow that they must be liable to death and decay. So he denies them a body, but allows them something like a body: denies them blood, but allows them something similar to blood.

‘Cato used to say that he wondered how one soothsayer could keep a straight face when he met another. I wonder even more how you Epicureans can take each other seriously. “It is not a body,” you say, “but it is like a body.” Now I could see some sense in this; if you were talking about images made in wax or clay. But when we are talking about a god, then I do not know what you mean by “not a body but like a body” or “not blood but like blood”. You do not know any more than I do, Velleius; but you will not admit it. Instead you delude us with the echo of your master’s voice recounting all the fancies of his dreams.

‘In his own writings he boasts that he himself never had a master. Even if he had not said so, I could well believe it. It is like the owner of a jerry-built house boasting that he has not employed an architect. Epicurus learned nothing from the Academy or from the Lyceum or even from the elements of philosophy which are taught to boys at school. He could have studied under Xenocrates – what a master! – and there are some who think he did. But he himself denied it, and he should know! He does say that he heard the lectures of a certain Pamphilus, a student of Plato, when he was living in Samos. He lived there as a young man with his father and brothers, his father Neocles having settled there as an immigrant farmer. But when he could not make a decent living from his small-holding I believe he kept a school. Epicurus however had a supreme contempt for Pamphilus as a follower of Plato, and in this he showed his usual anxiety never to learn anything from anyone. Look how he behaved towards Nausiphanes, a disciple of Democritus. He does not deny that he heard him lecture, but heaps all manner of abuse upon him. But what other instruction could he have had but that which he got from this scholar of Democritus? What after all is there in his own philosophy which does not come from Democritus? Even if he introduced some variations – such as the swerve in the motion of the atoms which I

mentioned just now – still for the most part his theory is identical – atoms, void, images, the infinity of space, the numberless universes, their birth and death, and so on through practically the whole field of natural philosophy.

‘Now tell me: do you know what he means by this body which is not body and this blood which is not blood? I will willingly admit that you know more about this than I do. But once the idea is put into words, why should Velleius be able to understand it but not Cotta? I understand what body is and I understand what blood is. But I have no comprehension whatever of anything which is like body but not a body or like blood but not blood. You are not deliberately keeping me in the dark, as Pythagoras used to do with the uninitiated: or deliberately speaking in riddles, like Heraclitus. But the fact is – one can speak the truth among friends – you can no more make any sense of it than I can.

‘As I understand it, you maintain that the gods have a certain bodily form, but that this form has no material composition, no solidity, nothing definite or distinguishable, but is pure and insubstantial, a sheer translucence. This is the kind of thing which is said about the famous Venus of Cos: that it is the very likeness of flesh and blood. For that diffused flush of rose and white, although not real, yet has the semblance of reality. So must the gods of Epicurus seem to be what they are not.

‘Let us then assume that I have been persuaded by an argument which I cannot even understand. Tell me now of the forms and features of these shadowy gods of yours. Here you are at no loss for arguments by which you may hope to persuade us that the gods have human shapes. First, you say that it is an innate tendency of the mind for a man, when he thinks of a divinity, to conceive of it in human form. Secondly that because the divine nature participates in every perfection, it must therefore also be clothed in the most beautiful form, and that no form is more beautiful than the human. And thirdly that reason cannot dwell in any other form.

‘Let us then consider each of these arguments and see what it comes to. You seem to me to be presenting something as self-evident which in fact is in every way improbable. Was there ever any student of these matters so blind as not to see that these human shapes have been transferred to the gods either by some conspiracy of wise men to turn the minds of the masses away from evil courses and towards the worship of the gods, or else through superstition, which created phantom figures which could be worshipped as though they were the living presence of the gods?

‘This tendency has been fostered by the poets, painters and image-

makers, as it was not easy to show the gods in life and action under any other guise. We also no doubt have to allow for the prejudice by which mankind conceive of themselves as the most noble of all creatures. But surely you, as a student of natural philosophy, can see how fond a match-maker is Nature and how she can play the pander to her own charms? Come now, do you believe that there is any creature on land or sea which does not find its greatest pleasure in other creatures of its own kind? If it were otherwise, why should not a bull take his pleasure with a mare, or a stallion with a cow? Do you imagine that an eagle, or a lion, or a dolphin prefers any other shape to his own? So is it any wonder if in the same way nature prescribes that mankind should consider no shape to be more beautiful than theirs? This I think is the reason why we think the gods are similar to men. If the beasts could speak,* do you not think that each would award the palm of excellence to its own kind?

‘Upon my soul, if we are to be frank about this, then although I have a good conceit of myself I would not dare to say that I am more handsome than the fabulous bull who gave a ride to Europa. We are not here concerned with human intelligence or power of speech, but only with shape and form. And if we are to imagine and make up shapes and forms, would you not like to be like that sea-creature Triton, who is pictured as part-man and part-fish, and so is carried swimmingly on his way?†

‘But I am getting into deep waters here. Such is the power of our natural prejudice that no one would wish to give up his human shape. No doubt an ant feels the same way. And which human shape are we speaking of? How many human beings are handsome? When I was in Athens, there were flocks of young men about but scarcely one handsome specimen to be found among them. You may laugh: but I am speaking the truth. And to us who take pleasure in the young, following the example of the philosophers of old, even blemishes may have their charm. Alcaeus was charmed by a mole on the finger of a boy. A mole is a blemish to the body: but to him it was an ornament. Quintus Catulus, the father of our colleague and friend, was devoted to Roscius, a fellow townsman of yours. You may remember the verses that he wrote about him! – “I stood to greet the rising sun, when suddenly Roscius rose at my left hand: Pardon me, gods in heaven, if I say, this mortal seemed to me more handsome than the god.” So you see, to Catulus this Roscius was more handsome than a god. In point of fact he squinted then as badly as he does today. But what of it? To Catulus it was an added charm.

‘Let us return to the gods. Are we to imagine that some of them have a cast in the eye, even if they do not squint? And that some of them have a mole? And that some are pug-nosed, some flap-eared,

and some beetle-browed or big-headed, like many of ourselves? Or with them is everything made perfect? Let us suppose that it is. Then are they all exactly the same? If not, then one must be more beautiful than another. In which case not every god can have beauty in supreme perfection. But if they are all alike, then the Academy must flourish in heaven, for if there is no difference between one god and another, then among the gods there can be no telling who's who or what's what!

‘But may it not be, Velleius, that it is altogether untrue that when we think of the gods we can only think of them in human shape? Do you really need to defend all these absurdities? We Romans may imagine the gods as you say. From childhood we are familiar with Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Neptune, Vulcan, Apollo and the other gods in the aspect in which it has pleased the painters and sculptors to present them, not only in form, but in ornament, and age and dress. But the Egyptians and the Syrians and almost all foreign races do not see them in this way. You will find that they have a firmer devotion to certain beasts than we have to the most sacred images and temples of our gods. For we see that many shrines are despoiled by our people and images of the gods are stolen even from the most sacred places. But nobody has ever heard tell that the sanctity of a crocodile or an ibis or a cat has been violated by an Egyptian. So do you not think that Apis, that sacred bull of the Egyptians, appears to them to be a god? Just as much so, I daresay, as to you this native goddess of yours, Juno the Saviour, whom you never see – no, not even in your dreams – without her goat-skin, spear, and shield and slippers with the turned-up toes! But this is not how she appears in Argos, or in Rome. So that Juno appears in one shape to the Argives, in another to you men of Lanuvium, and in yet another to us at Rome. In the same way Jupiter is presented in one shape to us on the Capitol and in another to the Africans at Ammon.

‘Are you not ashamed as a scientist, as an observer and investigator of nature, to seek your criterion of truth from minds steeped in conventional beliefs? On this basis you will be able to assert that Jupiter always has a beard and Apollo none, and that Minerva has grey eyes, and Neptune blue. Then again, we praise the statue of Vulcan at Athens, carved by Alcamenēs,^{*} in which we see the god clothed and standing, with his lameness just hinted at without deformity. So then we have a lame god, if we accept this version of him. Then again, are we to make out that the gods have the names which we have given them? But this means they have as many names as there are languages. You, Velleius, have the same name wherever you go: but Vulcan has different names in Italy, in Africa and in Spain. The number of different names is limited, even in our religious books:

but the number of gods in your view is infinite. Or do some of them have no names? This in fact is what you ought to maintain: for if they all look the same why should they have different names? How much better it would be, Velleius, to confess your ignorance of things you do not know rather than to sicken us by spouting all this rubbish, which cannot be pleasant even to yourself. Do you really think that a god looks like me or like you? The fact is, you have no idea.

‘Am I to say that the sun or the moon or the sky is a god? If they are gods, they must be happy. But what pleasures do they enjoy? And they must be wise. But how can wisdom dwell in limbless beings like these? These were your own arguments. But if the gods, as I have shown, do not have human shapes, and if you are convinced that they can have no other shape, then why do you hesitate to deny that they exist? The fact is, you do not dare to do so. And this is very prudent of you, even if in this place it is not the populace which you fear but only the gods themselves. I myself have known Epicureans who reverence every little image of a god, although I know that some believe that Epicurus gave lip-service only to the gods, so as not to offend the Athenians, but in fact did not believe in them.

‘In that selection of short sayings of his known as “The Basic Principles”, this, I believe, is the first: “A being which is blessed and immortal is itself without cares and brings no care to others.” Because of the form in which this proposition is couched, some think this simple man was deliberately ambiguous, when in fact the ambiguity arose from his inability to express himself plainly. And so it is not clear whether he is saying that there is a being which is happy and immortal, or saying that if there is such a being it must be such as he describes. It has been overlooked that, even if he speaks ambiguously in this place, in many other places both he and Metrodorus have spoken as bluntly as you did just now. He believed in the existence of the gods. And I have never known anybody who was more frightened of death and the gods, although he said that they should not be feared. He proclaims that the hearts of all mankind are terrified by things about which the man in the street does not seem much concerned. We have robbers by the thousands, although they have the penalty of death before their eyes: while others plunder every temple they can find. So the fear of death does not seem to deter the one, or the fear of the gods the other!

‘“But since you do not dare to deny that the gods exist” – I would say to Epicurus – “what reason is there why you should not concede divinity to the sun, or the earth or some eternal spirit?” “Because” – he would reply – “I have never known a rational and intelligent soul in any but a human form.” “But have you ever known anything like the sun or the moon or the five planets? The sun completes its annual

course, defining its motion by the two extremities of a single orbit. The moon, lit by the rays of the sun, completes the same course in a month. The five planets also keep their constant orbit, some nearer the earth, and others further away, and from the same points complete the same journeys in different periods of time. Did you ever actually see anything like this, Epicurus? Do you therefore deny that sun and moon and stars exist? Do you say that nothing can exist which we cannot touch or see? Did you ever actually see a god? Then why do you believe that gods exist? So let us abolish everything which we only know by hearsay or by some new hypothesis of our reason. This is as though people who dwell inland should refuse to believe in the existence of the sea. Such is your narrowness of mind that if you had been born in Seriphus and had never left this island, where you saw daily only little hares and foxes, you would refuse to believe in the existence of lions and panthers, when they were described to you. And if anyone told you about an elephant, you would think he was pulling your leg!"

'I have another point against you, Velleius. You wound up the gist of your argument by a logical deduction quite foreign to the school of Epicurus. You made the assumption that the gods are happy. We granted you this. Then you argued that happiness is impossible without goodness. We willingly granted you this as well. Then you said that goodness cannot exist without intelligence and on this too we must agree. But then you add, "There can be no intelligence except in human form." But who do you imagine will grant you this? If it were so, why did you have to approach it step by step? You would have assumed it as of right. I saw how you came by logical steps from happiness to goodness and from goodness to intelligence. But how did you come from intelligence to the human form? Not by a deduction but by a sort of headlong dive.

'I do not understand why Epicurus chose to say that gods were like men rather than that men were like gods. "What is the difference?" you may ask. "For if A is similar to B, then B is similar to A." I see this, but what I mean is that the gods cannot have taken their shape and form from men. The gods existed always. They were not born at some point in time, and they will exist to all eternity. But men are born of time. So the human form must on your showing have antedated mankind itself, because it was the form of the immortal gods. It would then be truer to say not that their shape is human but that ours is divine. You may agree or not that this is so. But then I ask, how did such a lucky chance come about? You deny that intelligence plays any part in the processes of nature. Then what sort of accident is this? What a fortunate clash of atoms, from which suddenly men are born in the image of the gods! Are we to suppose that the seed of the gods

fell down to earth from heaven, and hence arose mankind in the likeness of their fathers? I wish you would say so, for I would be only too glad to recognize my kinship with the gods! But you say nothing of the sort, and argue instead that our likeness to the gods has come about by chance. Do we need to look for arguments to refute this? I only wish it were as easy for me to discover the truth as to expose such falsehoods!

‘You gave us a full exposition from memory of all the opinions of the philosophers on the nature of the gods, from Thales of Miletus onwards. I was astonished to find such erudition in a Roman. But do you really believe all those philosophers were mad who held that a divine being could exist without hands or feet? When you consider the uses and aptitudes of the limbs in man, are you not forced to conclude that the gods have no need of them? What is the use of feet to a being who does not walk? Or of hands to a being who does not handle? Need I catalogue all the other organs of the body, in which there is nothing vain, nothing without its purpose, nothing superfluous – so that art can never reproduce the subtlety of nature. So your god will have a tongue, but will not speak. He will have teeth, palate and jaws; but to no purpose. And the organs of procreation, which nature has added to our bodies, will be useless to a god. As with the external organs, so with the internal also, the heart, the lungs, the liver and the rest. Take away their use and what beauty is there in them? And yet you want your god to have such human parts for beauty’s sake!

‘Was it on the basis of dreams like this that Epicurus and Metrodorus and Hermarchus attacked Pythagoras, Plato and Empedocles, and that little harlot Leontium dared to write criticisms of Theophrastus? Perhaps she did write good Greek: but all the same...! Such was the degree of licence tolerated in the Garden of Epicurus! And you Epicureans are a touchy lot and Zeno was a great one for going to law! Need I refer to Albucius? Phaedrus was a most urbane and courteous old gentleman but he used to lose his temper if I criticized him too strongly. But Epicurus himself made the most libellous attacks on Aristotle and violently abused Phaedo, the disciple of Socrates. He heaped whole volumes of invective on Timocrates, the brother of his own colleague Metrodorus, because of some petty disagreement on a philosophical point. He even showed no gratitude to Democritus, his own forerunner: and had no use for his own teacher Nausiphanes, from whom he had learnt nothing in any case.

‘Zeno not only reviled his own contemporaries, such as Apollodorus, Silus and the rest, but even referred to Socrates himself, the father of philosophy, as “the clown of Athens”. And always referred to Chrysippus as Chrysippa! And you yourself, when you were going through a sort of roll-call of the philosophers, called some of the most

famous men fools, dreamers and lunatics. But if none of these could discover the truth about the nature of the gods, we may well wonder whether they exist at all. Everything which you say about them is too fantastic even for the entertainment of old women at the midnight spinning-wheel! You seem to have no idea what you will let yourselves in for, if you are successful in persuading us that the gods have human shape!

‘A god will have to take the same care and concern for his body as a man. He will have to walk, and run, and lie down. He will have to bend, and sit and take hold of things. He will have to use speech and language. And as you say that there are both male and female gods, well, you can see as well as I can what is going to follow from that. The fact is, I cannot for the life of me imagine how your master Epicurus ever came to entertain such notions.

‘You keep reiterating that we must secure for the divine beings their happiness and immortality. But why should a god not be happy without being a biped? Why cannot this “blessedness” or “beatitude” of yours (both of them are awkward terms, but we must hope that with use they will come more easily to us) – why cannot it (whatever it may be) be an attribute of the earth itself, or of the sun, or of some eternal spirit which has no shape or body? All you can say is that you cannot perceive such an attribute in the sun or in the earth. But you have never seen any world but this one, have you? Why then do you assert not that there are, say, six hundred thousand worlds, but dare to say that there is an infinite number of them! “Reason demands it,” you say. Then does not the same reason also teach you that if you are looking for a being which is to have every perfection including happiness and immortality (which are the attributes of divinity only), then such a being must surpass us mortals not only by reason of its immortality but also in excellence of mind. And if it excels us in mind, then why not also in body? Why, when we are inferior to such a being in every other way, should we be similar to it in our bodily shape? It is human virtue not the human form which has often come nearest to the divine.

‘Let me pursue this argument further. Could anything be more childish than to deny the existence of those species of creatures which are to be found in the Red Sea or in India? For even the most curious inquirers can never even hear about all the myriad creatures which exist on earth or in the sea, in the swamps and in the rivers. But are we to deny their existence, because we have never seen them? In any event this alleged similarity of shape and outward form, which affords you so much pleasure, is really quite irrelevant. Is a dog not similar in appearance to a wolf? And, as Ennius says, “How like ourselves, in form and shape, Is that ill-favoured beast, the ape.”

‘But in both cases though the outward form is similar, the way of life is different. Then again, although there is no animal more sagacious than the elephant, there is also none more monstrous in appearance. But why speak of animals? Do we not find contrasts of character among men of similar looks and similar characters among men quite different in appearance? And if we once accept your line of argument, Velleius, then see where it is going to lead us. For you assume that reason can exist only in a human body. Then another may assume that it can exist only in an earthly body: in a body which is born and grows up: in a body which learns: in a body composed of mind and matter, which is frail and transient: in short, only in a mortal body. But if you would resist all such inferences, why are you concerned about the shape alone? For with all the attributes which I have just mentioned, you saw that a man combines reason and intelligence. But if all these other attributes are abstracted, you then claim to recognize a god, when in fact all that remains is just an empty outline. This is not serious argument: it is the choice of a theory by the throw of the dice!

‘But perhaps you do not even grasp the fact that not only in a man, but even in a tree, any part which is superfluous and useless is a disadvantage. What a nuisance to have an extra finger! Five are enough: a sixth is both unsightly and useless. But one of those gods of yours will not only have a superfluous finger, but also a superfluous head, neck, spine, sides, belly, back, hams, hands, feet and calves and thighs! If he is immortal, what has his life to do with all these mortal parts? Or with a mortal face? If anything, he would seem to have more need of a brain, heart, lungs and liver: for these are the dwelling-places of the vital spirit. The shape of the face does not affect the vigour of the inward life.

‘You poured abuse on those who considered the sublime and excellent works of the creation, who looked upon the universe itself, and upon its parts, the sky, the lands, the seas, made splendid by the sun and moon and stars, who observed the growth and change and transformations of the seasons, and from all this conjectured that there must be some sublime and wonderful power which had created the universe and ruled and guided it in all its ways. Even if they were mistaken in their belief, one can see the working of their minds. But in your philosophy what great and marvellous work is there which would seem to be the creation of a divine mind, and from which you might infer the existence of the gods? You say that you have in your mind a sort of innate idea of God. Is this then an idea of some bearded Jupiter, or helmeted Minerva? Surely you do not believe they actually exist in this form? Why, the ignorant mob shows more common sense than you. They do not merely attribute human limbs to the gods, but

give them full use of them as well. They give them bows, and arrows, and spears, and shields, and tridents, and thunderbolts. And even if they do not actually see the gods in action, they cannot conceive of a god who does nothing at all.

‘We laugh at the Egyptians: but they have never worshipped any beast from whom they did not derive some benefit. Take the case of the ibis: these birds can destroy a multitude of snakes, for they are tall, with stiff legs, and long horny beaks. They preserve Egypt from plague by killing and eating those winged snakes which are borne on the southwest wind from the Libyan desert, thus preserving the Egyptians both from the stings of the living and the odour of the dead. I could talk about the usefulness of the ichneumon, the crocodile and the cat. But I will not bore you. I merely remark that foreign races worship only those animals from whom they benefit in some way. But these gods of yours not only confer no benefits: they do nothing at all!

‘“But they are free from care,” he says. And indeed Epicurus, like a pampered child, thinks nothing is better than idleness. Yet even idle children amuse themselves by playing games of some sort. Do we wish these holidaying gods of ours to be sunk in such a lethargy of idleness that we must fear that if they were to stir themselves they would be miserable? This argument not only deprives the gods of motion and of their proper activity, but also encourages laziness in men. They are told that not even a god could be happy if he had anything to do.

‘And what if we accept your theory that a god has the face and form of a human being? Then where does he live? Where is his home? Where is he to be found? What is his way of life? And as you will have him happy, whence does his happiness derive? If any being is to be happy, it must have the use and enjoyment of what is properly its own. Even the inanimate parts of nature have each their own due sphere. So the earth has the lowest place, that it may be watered by the rain, the air a higher place, and the heavenly fires the highest place of all. The beasts of the earth too have their various habitations, some living in the water, and some being amphibious, at home in either place. There are even some creatures which are believed to be born in fire, and may often be seen flitting about in flaming furnaces.*

‘So I ask you first, where does this god of yours live? And secondly, in what circumstances does he move from his place, if he ever moves at all? And lastly, what is his purpose and desire? For it is the characteristic of all living creatures to desire some object proper to their nature. To what end does he use his mind and reason? And in what does his happiness consist and his immortality? Any of these questions will open up an ulcer in your theory. An argument which starts from false premises becomes a trap from which one cannot afterwards escape. You said that the divine form was perceived with

the mind and not with the senses. That there was no solid matter in it and it did not persist in its identity, but was seen only in the form of fleeting images, these images continually vanishing and being replaced from an infinity of particles. And this is the reason why, when we fix our mind upon them, they seem to us to represent a being both blessed and eternal. But I ask you, by the gods of whom we speak, what does all this mean? If they are real only as ideas in our minds, and have no solidity or substantial form, what is the difference between imagining a god and imagining a centaur? All other philosophers regard such creations of thought as empty fancies; but you speak of them as images coming from without and entering into our minds. Thus if while speaking on the Capitol I conjure up in my mind a picture of Tiberius Gracchus canvassing for the deposition of Marcus Octavius from his office of tribune, I would regard this as a mere act of imagination; but you believe that the actual images of Gracchus and Octavius have remained in existence on the spot and are then reflected into my mind when I go there.* It is the same in the case of a god whose image haunts our thoughts: and from this we are to conclude that the gods are blessed with immortality.

‘But suppose our minds are visited by such images, and that at most some apparition of this sort does come our way. Why should it be blessed? Why should it be immortal? What in fact are these “images” of yours and what is their origin? This whole fantasy is something you have derived from Democritus. But he has been criticized on all sides, and from these criticisms you will find no escape, for this whole theory limps and totters to its fall. What could be less plausible than that the images of all and sundry should come into my mind, the images of Homer, Archilochus, Romulus, Numa, Pythagoras, Plato? – let alone that they should represent them as they actually were. So how do they arise? Whose images are they? Aristotle tells us that the poet Orpheus never existed; and the Pythagoreans attribute the so-called “Songs of Orpheus” to a certain Cercops. But Orpheus (that is, the image of Orpheus, as you would say) is often in my mind. Again, why do you and I have in our minds different images of the same person? And why do we have in our minds images of creatures which have never existed and never could exist, such as Scylla and Chimaera? Why do we have images of men and places and cities which we have never seen? And how is it that I can call up an image instantly at will? And why do they also come to us unbidden in our sleep?

‘The whole theory, Velleius, is ridiculous. You are trying to foist these images of yours not only on our eyes but on our minds as well. Is there no limit to the old wives’ tales which you permit yourselves? There is, you say, a constant succession of fleeting images, so that

many of them blur together to form a single picture. I should be ashamed to confess that I do not understand this, if I did not know that you who maintain it do not understand it yourselves. How do you prove this continuous succession of images? And how can images be eternal, if there is a constant succession of them? They are constantly renewed, you say, from the infinite store of atoms. Do these then make everything eternal? Here you take refuge in your "law of correspondence" (if we may so translate your "isonomia") and say that because there is a temporal world there must also be an eternal one. By the same token one might argue that because there are mortal men there must also be immortal men; and that since there are men born on land there must also be men born in the sea. "Because there is a power which destroys," you say, "there must also be a power which preserves." No doubt: but this power can only preserve things which exist: and I do not believe these gods of yours exist at all.

'In any case how do all these pictures of the gods* arise from the atoms? If atoms existed (which they do not) they might perhaps be able to move each other about and to be thrown into confusion by collisions among themselves. But they could not produce form, and shape, and colour, and life itself. So your argument fails altogether to create an immortal god.

'Let us see now about happiness. This certainly cannot exist without virtue. But virtue is active, and your god does nothing. Therefore he has no virtue: and so he is not happy. Then what of his life? You say it is a feast of good things, with no tincture of evil. What good things? Pleasures, I suppose. Then they must be physical pleasures, because your school recognizes no pleasure of the mind which does not have its beginning and end in the physical body. I take it that you, Velleius, are not like the rest of our Epicureans, who are ashamed of those sayings of Epicurus in which he states that he does not understand how there can be anything good except sensual and sexual pleasures. And he then goes on quite unabashed to enumerate these pleasures one by one. So tell me, what food are you going to give the gods, and what drink, what varieties of songs and flowers, what delights of touch and smell, so that they may drown in pleasure? The poets give them nectar and ambrosia at their feasts, with Hebe or Ganymede to pour their wine. But what about you, my Epicurean friend? I do not see how your gods could have such things or how they could enjoy them if they did. So that on your theory human beings are more richly endowed for the happy life than are the gods, for human beings enjoy all sorts of pleasure.

'Perhaps you will say that all these pleasures are merely trifling "titillations of the senses", in Epicurus's phrase. If so, you must be joking. Our friend Philo would never concede that the Epicureans

despised the pleasures of luxury and sensuality. He used to quote from memory many sayings of Epicurus, in the exact words of the written texts. And he used to quote even more audacious sayings of Metrodorus, who shared all the wisdom of Epicurus. Metrodorus attacked his own brother Timocrates because Timocrates was not willing to measure all that makes for a happy life by the standards of the belly. And he made this criticism not once but several times. I see you nod your head. You know the passages I have in mind. If you challenged them, I could produce the book and show you chapter and verse. But I am not at the moment objecting to your reduction of everything to pleasure as the sole criterion. That is another question. I am merely showing that your gods cannot experience pleasure and so on your own showing cannot be happy.

“But the gods are free from suffering.” Is that what you mean by a life of supreme beatitude, abounding in every good? “The gods live in constant contemplation of their own happiness.” No doubt. In your theory they have nothing else to occupy their minds. Imagine now and picture to yourself a god who has no other thought in his mind through all eternity except “I’m all right” and “How happy I am!” And I do not see either why such a god should not be apprehensive of his own possible dissolution, if he is continuously battered and shaken by an endless rain of atoms and if there is a constant emission of his substance in the form of images. So this god of yours would be neither happy nor immortal.

‘It is true that Epicurus wrote books about the sanctity of the gods and the need for reverence towards them.* But what does he actually say? He writes in such a style that one would imagine that one was listening to some high priest such as Coruncianus or Scaevola and not to the man who destroyed the whole foundation of religious faith and overturned the altars and the temples of the gods, not by main force, as Xerxes did, but by force of argument. How can you say that mankind should reverence the gods, if the gods themselves not only have no care for man, but care for nothing whatever and have no influence on anything?

‘But, you say, so sublime and excellent is their nature as to charm the wise to worship them for their own sake. What excellence is there in a nature which merely rejoices in its own well-being and does nothing, never has done anything and never will do anything? What reverence do we owe to a being from whom we receive nothing in return? What can we owe to a being who has no claim upon us? What is piety but justice towards the gods: and what bond of law can there be between them and us, if there is nothing in common between gods and men? Religion is the science of divine worship: but why the gods should be worshipped at all I do not know, if we have nothing good to

thank them for, now or for ever.

‘Why should we worship the gods and reverence their divinity, if we see nothing admirable in it? You boast that you are free from superstition: but it is easy to be so when one has deprived the gods of all their power. How for instance could Diagoras or Theodorus have been superstitious once they had denied the existence of the gods? I do not think Protagoras could have been so either, who would neither assert nor deny their existence. The teachings of all these philosophers do not merely free us from superstition, which is a senseless fear of the gods, but also destroy religion itself, with all reverence and worship. Then there are those who have argued that all our beliefs about the gods have been fabricated by wise men for reasons of state, so that men whom reason could not persuade to be good citizens might be persuaded by religion. Have not these also totally destroyed the foundations of belief? Or Prodicus of Chios, who ascribed divinity to everything which benefits mankind: what room did he leave for religion? There are also those who teach that brave and famous and powerful men have been deified after death and that these are the gods whom we have now become accustomed to worship and reverence and to whom we pray. Are not such men devoid of all religious feeling? This line of thought has been especially developed by Euhemerus: and our own Ennius has been his foremost disciple and interpreter. Euhemerus describes how these deified heroes died and where they lie buried. Does such a man seem to you to have strengthened religion or to have utterly undermined and destroyed it? I say nothing of the holy and solemn shrine of Eleusis,

Where all the peoples of the earth
Are made partakers of the mysteries,*

or of Samothrace or of those secret rites which are celebrated on Lemnos,

By throngs of worshippers by night, in shadowy groves.†

For when these are examined by the light of reason, they seem to be a recognition of the powers of Nature rather than the power of God.

‘Indeed, to my mind even Democritus, one of the truly great men, from whose springs of thought Epicurus watered his own little garden, seems to fall into some confusion about the nature of the gods. In one place he says that there are to be found in the universe images endowed with a divine power: in another that the elements of intelligence to be found in this same universe are themselves divine: and in yet another that there are living images which may help or harm us and that some of these images are so vast in size that they

embrace and enfold the whole world. All of these ideas are more worthy of his place of birth than of the man himself.* Who can understand what he means by these images? What is there in them to revere? Who would think them worthy of our worship and adoration?

‘Then comes Epicurus and uproots religion entirely from the minds of men by taking away all grace and favour from the gods. For while he attributes a sublime excellence to the divine nature, he takes away that very graciousness which is the essence of the best and noblest spirits. For there is nothing better or nobler than goodness and loving-kindness. If you take away the grace of God, then you will have it that nobody is dear to a god, neither god nor man; that he loves nobody, and cares for nobody. And so it will come about that not only will man be of no concern to the gods but even the gods will be of no concern to one another.

‘How much better are the doctrines of the Stoics, which you criticize. They believe that a wise man is the friend of all other wise men, even of those of whom he has no knowledge. For there is nothing more lovable than goodness, and we ought to love all those throughout the whole world who have sought for goodness, and have found it. What a bad lesson you teach us when you reckon grace and loving-kindness as a weakness! Let alone the power and nature of the gods, do you believe that all goodwill and kindness in men has arisen and can arise only from weakness? Is there then no natural affection between men of goodwill? Why are the very words of “love” and “friendship” so pleasant to our ears?† That is no true friendship which is concerned with our own advantage and not with the well-being of our friend: that is merely a sort of trading for our own profit, in which we love our friends only to the same extent as we love our lands and fields and flocks, because we derive profit from them. But a true human friendship is free and selfless: how much more free and selfless then must be the love and friendship of the gods! In their mutual love they have no need of recompense or in their care for men. If it were not so, why do we pray to them and worship them? Why does the priest preside over the sacrifice, or the prophet read the omens? What do we ask of the gods, what can we offer them?

‘But, you will say, Epicurus himself wrote a book on the sanctity of the gods. In this book the reader is fooled by a man who wrote not so much with irony as with a wild abandon. For what have we to do with holiness, if the gods have no concern with us? and what sort of living god is it, who cares about nothing? It is obviously true, as our mutual friend Posidonius argued in the fifth book of his work on the nature of the gods, that Epicurus did not believe the gods existed at all and that what he said about them was said merely to avoid the odium of atheism. He could not have been such a fool as to imagine a god who

in his outward appearance had the likeness of a mere mortal but without his physical constitution! A god endowed with human limbs but with no use for them! A god transparent and insubstantial, giving no sign of grace or favour to anyone, inactive and indifferent! In the first place such a being could not even exist, and Epicurus knew this, so that he merely paid lip-service to gods whom he had in fact destroyed. And finally, if this is all that a god is, a being untouched by care or love of human kind, then I wave him good-bye. Why should I ask his favour? He cannot do a favour to anybody: for in your philosophy all grace or kindness is the mark of weaklings not of gods.'

BOOK II

WHEN Cotta had spoken, Velleius said, 'It was indeed rash of me to attempt to argue with someone who is both an academician and an orator. I would have no fear of an academician who had no gift of words or of an orator however eloquent who was not a good academic philosopher. I am not put out by a stream of empty words, or by subtle propositions quite devoid of eloquence. But you, Cotta, are a champion on both counts. You only lacked an audience and a jury. But more of this another time. Let us now hear Lucilius, if he will favour us with his views.'

'I should prefer first to hear more from Cotta himself,' said Balbus, 'if he would portray for us the true gods as eloquently as he has exposed the false. It behoves Cotta, both as philosopher and priest, and in his own person, not to be vague and uncertain in his ideas about the immortal gods, as the Academy is, but to be clear and constant in his views, as we are. His attack on Epicurus was overwhelming. But I would like to know, Cotta, what is your own opinion.'

'Have you forgotten then,' said Cotta, 'what I said at the beginning, that it is much easier for me to say what I do not believe than what I do believe, especially in questions of this sort? But even if I had anything definite to say, I would still prefer now to hear you speak in turn, as I have myself already spoken at such length.'

'Be it as you wish then,' said Balbus, 'and I shall be as brief as I can. As you have already exposed the errors of Epicurus, this will save me many words of argument.'

'In general the philosophers of our school divide the whole theological question into four parts. First, we teach that divine beings exist. Secondly, we explain their nature. Thirdly, we describe their government of the world. And lastly we show how they care for mankind. But in what I am going to say I shall deal only with the first and second of these subjects. The third and fourth would take us too wide and must be deferred for another occasion.'

'Not at all,' said Cotta, 'we are at leisure here and we are concerned with matters which are of greater moment to us than any other business we might have in hand.'

'Very well,' said Lucilius, 'but the first proposition – that divine beings exist – seems to need no words of mine. For what could be more clear and obvious, when we look up to the sky and contemplate the heavens, than that there is some divinity of superior intelligence,

by which they are controlled? If it were not so, how could Ennius have been universally applauded when he wrote:

Lift up your eyes to that bright firmament,
Which men call Jupiter,

and not only Jupiter but the lord of the universe, who sways all nature by his nod and is, as Ennius says, “the father both of gods and men”, a present and a mighty god. If anyone doubts this, then so far as I can see he might just as well doubt the existence of the sun. For the one is as plain as the other. And if this were not clearly known and manifest to our intelligence, the faith of men would not have remained so constant, would not have deepened with the lapse of time, and taken ever firmer root throughout the ages and the generations of mankind. For we see that other superstitious beliefs and vain imaginings have died out with the passing years. For who today believes that the centaur or the chimaera ever existed? Could anyone nowadays discover a single old gossip-woman so simple-minded that she fears such monsters of the underworld, in which men formerly believed? Time washes away the fancies of imagination but confirms the judgements of nature. And so, both in our own country and in others, the worship of the gods and the sanctity of religion grow firmer and fairer day by day. And this does not happen blindly or by chance but because the gods time and again declare their presence.

‘For example, at Lake Regillus in the Latin War, when Aulus Postumius was in command in the battle against Octavius Mamilius of Tusculum, Castor and Pollux were seen fighting on horseback in our ranks. And in more recent times they appeared to announce the defeat of Perses of Macedon. When Publius Vatinius, the grandfather of our young contemporary, was travelling by night to Rome from Reate, of which he was governor, two young men on white horses told him that Perses had been captured that very day, and when he arrived in Rome he announced it to the Senate. Whereupon he was promptly thrown into prison for contempt of the assembly. But afterwards, when dispatches from Paulus confirmed the king’s capture on that very day, this same Vatinius was granted lands and special privileges by senatorial decree. Again, when the Locrians defeated the men of Croton in a great battle on the river Sagra, tradition records that news of this battle was heard the same day at the Olympic games. Often men have heard the voice of fauns in the forests and the gods have often appeared in many forms so as to compel anybody who is not a fool or a worldling to admit that they are present here among us.

‘Then there is the evidence of predictions and prophecies of things to come. Surely these prove that the future is foretold, portended,

foreshadowed and predicted to mankind. Hence they are called revelations, portents, signs and wonders. We may dismiss as fictions all the stories told about Mopsus, Tiresias, Amphiaraus, Calchas and Helenus, although their powers would not have been recognized in fiction without some foundation in fact. But surely there is enough evidence nearer home to convince us of the living presence of the gods. Must we not learn a lesson from the folly of Publius Claudius in the first Punic War? He thought that he could raise a laugh by jesting at the gods. So when the chickens were released from their cage but would not eat, he ordered them to be drowned. "If they won't eat," said he, "they will have to drink." But this jest was followed by a defeat at sea which cost him many tears and Rome many lives. And did not his colleague Junius, in the same war, lose a fleet in a storm through disregard of omens? As a result of these disasters Claudius was convicted of treason and Junius committed suicide. Caelius tells us how Gaius Flaminius met his death at Lake Thrasimene through his contempt for religion and inflicted a severe disaster on our nation. The fate of these men shows us that the state prospers only under the guidance of men of religious faith.

'If we compare ourselves with other peoples, in other respects we shall find that we are equal or even inferior: but in religion and the worship of the gods we are pre-eminent. Ought we to laugh at the story of Attus Navius and his augur's staff, with which he divided a vineyard into sections to find a lost pig?*' If so, let us remember that King Hostilius welcomed his advice in the conduct of great campaigns.

'But through the negligence of our leaders the art of augury has been lost, and men no longer believe in the truth of omens, which are now taken only as a formality. And so in the greatest affairs of state, such as these present wars which touch the safety of our whole nation, there is no heed of omens! No auspices are taken before a river is crossed or from the glint of victory upon our spears. When men are called to arms no wills are made before a battle, for our generals give up their augural powers before they take up their commands.

'But so deep was the religious feeling of our ancestors that some generals would veil their heads and in solemn phrases offer up their lives to the gods in the service of their country. And I could give many examples of augury from the prophecies of the Sibyls and from the sayings of soothsayers in confirmation of facts of which no one should be in doubt.

'In the consulship of Publius Scipio and Gaius Figulus the science both of our own augurs and of the Etruscan soothsayers was confirmed by factual evidence. Tiberius Gracchus at the end of his second consulship was about to announce the election of the new consuls. The returning officer collapsed and died just as he was

announcing the names. Gracchus nevertheless went through with the election. But as he sensed that the public had doubts about the correctness of the procedure, he referred the question to the Senate. The Senate in its turn decided to refer it to the soothsayers, in accordance with their normal practice. The soothsayers when they were consulted gave it as their opinion that the elections had been improperly conducted in the matter of the returning officer. Whereupon Gracchus, as my father told me, flew into a rage and shouted, "What? You say I was not in order, when I was myself a consul and an augur, and had taken auspices? Do you imagine that you Etruscan barbarians have authority to lay down the law in these matters to the people of Rome and to set yourselves up as arbiters of their elections?" And he sent them packing. But afterwards, when he was governor of Sardinia, he sent a letter to the College of Augurs in which he said that after refreshing his memory from a reading of the authorities, he had come to the conclusion that his procedure in the taking of the auspices had been irregular. He had taken Scipio's Park as the site for his augural tent, but he had subsequently entered the city limits to hold a meeting of the Senate, and had forgotten on his return to take the auspices on crossing the boundary again.* So the election of the consuls had been irregular. The College of Augurs referred his letter to the Senate. The Senate passed a resolution leading to the resignation of the consuls. Could we ask for a clearer example? Here we have one of our wisest statesmen – perhaps the greatest of them all – preferring to confess an error which he might well have concealed rather than to allow any suspicion of impiety to infect the state. Here we have consuls who preferred immediately to resign the highest office, rather than to hold it even for a moment in defiance of the sacred law.

"The authority of the augur is great. But the art of the soothsayer is divine. And when we see innumerable examples of such facts, must we not give our assent to the existence of the gods? Beings who do not exist can send us no messengers. But the gods do have their prophets and their messengers. So how can we deny that they exist?

"You may say that not every prophecy is fulfilled. But in the same way not every sick person is cured. Are we then to say there is no art of medicine? The truth is that the gods send us portents of things to come, and any mistakes which may be made in their interpretation arise from human speculation and not from the nature of the gods.

"The crux of the matter is known to all men everywhere. From their birth it is inscribed upon their minds that gods exist.

"It is the nature of the gods which is in question and not their existence. Indeed our own Cleanthes speaks of four influences which have formed man's image of the gods. First he mentions the argument

which I have just advanced, based on foreknowledge of future events. Next there is the influence exerted upon us by the great blessings which we enjoy from a temperate climate, from the fruitfulness of the earth, and from the abundance of other blessings. Thirdly, there is the awe inspired by thunderbolts, storms, cloudbursts, blizzards, hailstorms, floods, plagues, earthquakes or sudden tremors of the earth, showers of stones, and raindrops red as drops of blood: from the subsidences and sudden fissures in the earth: from monstrosities in man or beast: from fiery portents and comets in the skies,* such as recently foretold frightful disasters in the civil war: or from the appearance of twin suns, as happened, so my father told me, in the consulship of Tuditanus and Aquilius, the year in which Scipio Africanus died, himself as glorious as a second sun.† Terrified by such events as these, men came to see in them the working of some divine and heavenly power. Fourthly, and perhaps the most important, the regularity of motion of the heavenly bodies: the variety, beauty and order of the sun and moon and all the stars. Why, the very aspect of the heavens declared that they were not the work of chance. If one comes into a house, or a gymnasium, or a public place, and sees everything properly arranged and carried on in order, one does not imagine these arrangements to be accidental, but infers that there is someone in command whose orders are obeyed. How much more then when we are confronted with movements so vast and changes so profound, with the government of bodies so immense and so innumerable, which has never deviated through all the immeasurable ages of the infinite past, must we not admit that such mighty natural movements are guided and controlled by some divine intelligence?

‘Chrysippus is a man of great intellectual power but in the following passage he seems to report only what Nature herself has taught him rather than to put forward any discovery of his own. “If there is anything in nature which the human mind, which human intelligence, energy and power could not create, then the creator of such things must be a being superior to man. But the heavenly bodies in their eternal orbits could not be created by man. They must therefore be created by a being greater than man. But what is such a greater being but a god? For if no gods exist, then what is there in nature greater than man? He alone is endowed with the supreme gift of reason. Only an arrogant fool would imagine that there was nothing in the whole world greater than himself. Therefore there must be something greater than Man. And that something must be God.”

‘So argues Chrysippus: and in truth, if you see some great and beautiful building, would you infer, because the architect is not immediately visible, that it must have been built by mice and weasels? It is the same with all the splendour of the world, all the

multitudinous beauty of the heavens, all the power and glory over land and sea. Can anyone among us be so mad as to imagine that we can claim to be the lords and masters of these dwelling-places of almighty God? And do we not even understand, that what is higher is always better? The earth however lies low and is surrounded by a dense atmosphere: and just as we see it happen in some towns and districts that the minds of the inhabitants are dulled by the heaviness of the air, so it happens also in some degree to the whole human race, because they are earthbound at the misty bottom of the universe. But even from our own natural wit, such as it is, we may infer the existence of some divine intelligence more powerful than our own.

“But whence did man ‘pick up’ his own intelligence?” as Socrates asks in the *Memoirs* of Xenophon. For if you ask whence we derive the heat and moisture which permeates our bodies, and the earthly solidity of our flesh, and our breath of life, then it is clear that we derive our flesh from the earth, our moisture from the water, our warmth from fire and our breath from the air, which we call the atmosphere.

‘But what of that which surpasses all these, I mean reason, or, if you wish, in other words, mind, purpose, thought, wisdom? Where have we found this? Whence have we derived it? Does the universe have everything else, but yet lack this one thing, the most valuable of all? Yet beyond doubt there is nothing superior to the universe, there is nothing more excellent or more beautiful. Not only is there nothing better, but nothing better can even be imagined. But if reason and wisdom are the best of all things, they must belong to that which we confess to be the best. Well then? Are you not compelled by this consensus, this harmony, this unbroken kinship of nature to approve what I have said? How else would it be possible for the earth to blossom at one time and to be a desert at another? Or how could the coming and going of the sun be signalled by such a variety of transformations, as winter comes and summer goes? Or how could the ocean tides and currents of the narrow seas be governed by the motions of the moon? Or how could the courses of the different stars be preserved within the mighty revolution of the whole creation? All this can come about only through a harmony of all parts of the universe which would be impossible if it were not preserved throughout by one divine and omnipresent spirit. And when this doctrine is explained more fully and in detail, as I propose to do, it can more easily escape the captious criticisms of the Academy: but when one presents it in a form more brief and summary, as Zeno used to do, it seems more vulnerable to their attack. A flowing river cannot be so easily polluted as can a standing pool. A full discourse washes away the scum of criticism, but the circle of a closed argument cannot

so easily preserve its pristine purity. Now the argument which we would expand Zeno has stated summarily as follows: "That which has reason is more perfect than that which has not. But there is nothing more perfect than the universe: therefore the universe is a rational being." It can similarly be proved that the universe is wise, blessed and eternal. For beings possessed of all these qualities are superior to beings which lack them, and there is nothing superior to the universe. Hence it follows that the universe and God are one. Zeno also gives another proof: "If a being is without consciousness, then every part of that being must also be without consciousness. But some parts of the universe are conscious beings: therefore the universe itself must be a conscious being." He then goes on to argue this more closely. "Nothing," he writes, "which is devoid of life and intelligence can give birth to any living creature which has intelligence. But the universe does give birth to living creatures which partake of intelligence in their degree. The universe is therefore itself a living intelligence." And then, as was his custom, he rounds off his argument with a comparison. "If flutes playing tunes were to grow on olive-trees, would you not infer that the olive must have some knowledge of the flute? Or if a plane-tree were to bear lyres playing in harmony, would you not similarly infer that the plane-tree was something of a musician? Why then will you not admit the universe to be a conscious intelligence since conscious intelligences are born from it?"

'I see that I have begun to break the promise which I made when I began. I said that as it was obvious to everybody that gods existed, this could be accepted at the start as an axiom which did not call for any explanation. However, I would like to prove it by scientific arguments.

'The fact is that everything which grows and flourishes contains in itself a natural heat without which it could not grow or flourish. Everything which has within it heat and fire is stirred and enlivened by their motion. And while anything grows and flourishes, this motion is steady and regular. And so long as it remains so with us, our life and consciousness continue. But when this vital warmth grows cold and finally extinct, we ourselves decline and die. Cleanthes illustrates by the following arguments how great is the power of heat in any body. He says that there is no food so heavy that it is not digested within twenty-four hours: and that even after this time warmth still remains in the excrement which the body rejects. Furthermore the veins and arteries throb constantly with a fiery pulse. It has often been observed that if the heart is torn out of any animal, it continues to beat violently like a flickering fire. Therefore everything which lives, whether it is animal or vegetable, lives only by reason of the heat enclosed within it. From which it can be seen that this heat has by

nature a vital force within itself which permeates the whole world.

‘We shall see this more clearly from a further examination of this whole fiery principle which pervades the world. For all the elements of the world (and I shall mention only the most important) are supported and sustained by heat. We can see this first in the elements of earth, when we observe how fire is produced from stone by friction or a blow: or how in a recent excavation the earth will smoke with heat: or how warm water is drawn up from wells, especially in winter, when the heat of the earth is concentrated in her caverns underground. This concentration is greatest in winter, and for this reason the heat stored in the earth is more compressed.

‘I could explain at length and by many arguments that everything that is born of Mother Earth and all the plants which she generates and holds rooted in her soil owe their origin and growth to this temperate warmth. That heat is present in water can be seen from the behaviour of this liquid itself. It would not be frozen by cold or coalesce into snow and frost, if it was not also dissolved again and liquefied by the admixture of heat. So liquids are solidified by the northern cold or bitter winds from any quarter and are softened and melted again by warmth. And even the ocean grows warm when stirred up by the winds, so that it can easily be seen that heat is hidden in its liquid mass. This warmth is not to be regarded as something external and foreign, but is expelled in storms from the innermost parts of the sea, as also happens in our own bodies when they grow warm from exercise and movement. Even the air, although it is the coldest of the elements, is by no means lacking in warmth, and indeed has a considerable admixture of heat. Air is created as it were by the breathing of the waters, and may be said to be their exhalation. It comes into being from the power of the heat which they contain, and we can see this likeness in water boiling over a fire. The remaining fourth element of the universe is fiery throughout of its own nature and imparts its saving vital warmth to all the rest. From which it follows that as all the elements of the universe are sustained by heat, so the whole universe is itself preserved through all the ages by a similar power: the more so, because it must be understood that this hot and fiery principle is so infused throughout the whole of nature that it provides the life-force and is the source of all that comes to be, and from it is born and nourished every living creature and every plant whose roots are in the earth.

‘That which we call Nature is therefore the power* which permeates and preserves the whole universe, and this power is not devoid of sense and reason. Every being which is not homogeneous and simple but complex and composite must have in it some organizing principle. In man this organizing principle is reason and in animals it is a power

akin to reason, and from this arises all purpose and desire. Such a power is also present in the roots of trees and of every plant that springs up from the earth. This is the power which the Greeks call the “guiding force”, and it is and must be dominant in every complex being. It follows that the being in which is found the organizing principle for the whole of nature must be the supreme being, worthy of power and dominion over all.

‘So we see that the parts of the world (for there is nothing in the world which is not a part of the universe as a whole) have sense and reason. So these must be present to a higher and greater degree in that part which provides the organizing principle of the whole world. So the universe must be a rational being and the Nature which permeates and embraces all things must be endowed with reason in its highest form. And so God and the world of Nature must be one, and all the life of the world must be contained within the being of God.

‘This universal fire is purer, clearer, and more subtle by far, and so more quick to move our senses than the vital heat by which the things familiar to us are preserved and fostered. It is therefore absurd to say that the universe is devoid of consciousness, when men and animals, which experience only this earthly fire, are thereby quickened into conscious life. The universe is permeated by the pure, free and original fire, the most subtle and most powerful, and this universal fire is not stirred up from without, but is moved only from within by the power of its own will. For what is there more powerful than the whole world, which could inspire the life and movement of this fire which permeates it all?

‘Let us also hear what Plato has to say, a man who was himself almost a god among philosophers. He believes that there are two forms of motion, one intrinsic and the other external: and that that which moves itself of its own volition is more divine than that which is driven only by external impulse.* The first form of motion he attributes only to the soul, to which the origin of all motion is to be traced. But since all physical motion arises from the cosmic fire and that fire is moved not by external impulse but by its own will, this fire must itself be soul. From which it follows that the universe is a conscious being. And as the universe as a whole is surely superior to any other natural being, it must be endowed with reason. There is no part of our own bodies which is equal in value to our whole being. Similarly the universe as a whole must be of greater excellence than any of its parts. Otherwise Man, who is only a part of the world, would as a rational being be superior to the whole creation.

‘If then we work upwards from primal chaos to ultimate perfection we must in the end arrive at the nature of the gods. First we see that all the plants of the earth are preserved by Nature, but that she gives

them only the nourishment necessary to their growth. But to the animals she gives also sense and motion, with an instinct to seek the things which are good for them and to avoid those which are injurious. To Man she has given something more, the power of reason to control the instincts, so that these are sometimes given free rein and at others held close in check.

‘But the fourth and highest stage is reached only by those beings who are born with a nature which is both good and wise. In such beings there is innate a way of thought which is constant and true, which we have to recognize as something superhuman which must be an attribute of God or in other words of the universe, in which, as I have said, must dwell the power of reason in its absolute perfection. It is impossible to name any sphere of life in which there is not some element of finality and perfection. Thus in the instance of vineyards or of livestock we see how, if no accident prevents it, Nature pursues her path towards the full attainment of her goal. We see too how painters and sculptors and other artists produce works which have their own ideal of perfection. In the same way and indeed much more must the whole natural world strive toward something absolute and perfect.

‘The various creatures of the universe may meet with many external obstacles to their perfect development. But no obstacle can frustrate the development of the universe itself. The universe moulds and embraces all things. Therefore we must admit the existence of that fourth and final stage of being, which no power can assail. This is the stage of being on which the whole of nature depends. It is thus above all things and nothing has any power against it, and is the universal dwelling-place of reason and of wisdom.

‘What could be more stupid than to deny the supreme excellence to that universal nature which embraces all things? And if it is supreme in excellence, must it not be conscious, endowed with reason and purpose, and finally with wisdom? How else can it be supreme? For if it were like a plant or an animal, there would be reason to rate it at the bottom rather than at the top of the scale. And if it is endowed with mind, but has been without wisdom from the beginning, its state will be lower than that of Man. A man can become wise. But if the universe has been devoid of wisdom through all the infinity of past time, then obviously it will never acquire any now. So it will be inferior to Man. But this is absurd, and we must therefore conclude that the universe was endowed with wisdom from eternity and is itself divine. There is nothing, other than the universe as a whole, that lacks nothing and is complete and perfect throughout in every part.

‘Chrysippus put it well. As the cover is made to fit the shield and the scabbard to fit the sword, so everything in nature, except the universe itself, has been created to serve something other than itself. Thus the

fruits of the earth serve the needs of animals: and animals serve the needs of man, the horse to carry him, the ox to plough for him, the dog to hunt or watch for him. And man himself was created to contemplate and reflect the world, not himself a perfect being but a particle only of perfection. But the universe itself, which embraces all things and apart from which there is nothing, is perfect in every way. How then can it lack the greatest excellence of all? And as there is nothing superior to mind and reason, these must be present in the world.

‘Chrysippus also argues well, and shows by analogies how good qualities are always rather to be found in creatures which are perfect of their kind and fully mature, in a horse more than in a foal, in a dog more than in a puppy, and in a man more than in a boy. So the highest quality of all must be present in that which is absolute and perfect. But there is no quality higher than goodness and nothing more perfect than the universe. Therefore goodness must be a characteristic of the universe. Man’s own nature is not perfect: and yet goodness can show itself even in man: but how much more readily in the universe! So there is goodness in the universe, and wisdom, and therefore the universe itself is God.

‘When we have understood the divinity of the universe as whole, we must also recognize the divinity of the heavenly bodies. These are created out of the purest and most active elements of the aether, with no admixture of any baser substance, but are all heat and fire. So that they too may very properly be described as living beings, conscious and intelligent. That they are all fire Cleanthes holds to be proved by the evidence of two senses, touch and sight. For the splendour of the sun is more radiant than that of any other fire, as it shines far and wide through the immensity of the universe. And such is the power of its touch that it not only warms but even burns. Both these facts are evidence of its fiery nature. “Therefore,” he goes on, “since the sun is a fire, and is fed by the vapours of the sea (for no fire can continue without being fed from somewhere) it must either be similar to the fire which we use in our daily life or to that vital heat which permeates the bodies of living creatures. But this fire of ours, which we use in daily life, destroys and consumes everything. Wherever it penetrates, it brings confusion and dissolution. On the other hand the vital heat of our bodies is benign: it preserves, nourishes, increases, sustains and is the source of conscious life.” He therefore argues that there is no doubt which of these types of fire is akin to the heat of the sun. For the sun too makes all things to flourish and to grow each according to its kind. But if the heat of the sun is similar to the vital heat of the bodies of living creatures, then the sun itself must be alive. So also must the other stars, which are born in that heavenly fire

which we call the aether or the sky. As living creatures of different kinds arise on earth, in water and in the air, it seems to Aristotle absurd that no living creatures should exist in that element which is most fitted to give birth to them.* Now the stars have their being in the aether, which is the most subtle of the elements, and is always in lively motion. It therefore follows that whatever creatures are native to it will have the keenest senses and the swiftest movements. As the stars arise and are born in this element, we must infer that they are conscious and intelligent beings. From this it follows that we must include the stars in the company of the gods.

‘We can see that those who live in countries where the air is pure and clear have keener minds and a quicker intelligence than those who breathe a thicker, denser air. It also seems that the food which we eat has some effect upon the sharpness of our wits. It is therefore probable that the heavenly bodies have superior intelligence, since their abode is in the aethereal regions of the universe and the vapours of earth and sea by which they are fed are rarefied by their long journey through the intervening space. But the conscious intelligence of the stars is most evident from the order and regularity of their movement. For nothing can move in a measured and orderly way without the guidance of an intelligence in which there is nothing arbitrary, dubious or accidental. The orderly motion of the stars, which is constant through all eternity, cannot be attributed to natural processes alone. It is the expression of an inward purpose. Neither can it be attributed to accident, which is the friend of chaos and the enemy of order. It follows therefore that the stars move of their own free will and through their own divine intelligence.

‘It has also been well said by Aristotle that everything which moves is moved either by nature, by external force or by its own will.* The sun and moon and stars are all in movement. But things which are moved by nature are carried either downward by their weight or upwards by their lightness. But in neither case is this true of the stars, whose motion is in a circular orbit. Neither can we say that the stars are moved contrary to their own nature by some greater external force. For what could this greater force be? It therefore follows that the stars move of their own volition.

‘Once we have understood this, we should be not only stupid but also impious if we deny the existence of the gods. It does not make much difference either, whether we deny it or merely deprive the gods of all activity and purpose. For it seems to me that anything which is entirely inactive might as well not exist. But it is so clear that the gods exist that I am inclined to doubt the sanity of anybody who denies it.

‘It remains for us to consider the nature of these gods. Here we are faced with the great difficulty of opening the eyes of the mind in place

of the eyes of the body. It is because of this difficulty that the man in the street and the philosophers of common sense are unable to imagine the immortal gods except in human form. Cotta has already exposed the folly of this notion, so I need say no more about it. But as we have an innate idea in our minds that God must be a living God and supreme above all else in the world, there seems to me nothing more consonant with this idea than to recognize the whole universe, than which there can be nothing more sublime, as being itself the living God.

‘Epicurus may make a joke of this if he likes, although humour was never his strong point – an Athenian without the “Attic salt”! He may say that he can make no sense of a “spherical and revolving god”. But he will never move me from the one view which even he himself accepts. He agrees that gods exist, because there must be some supreme being which is superior to all else. But there cannot be anything greater than the whole universe. And it is clear that a being which is alive with sense and reason is better than one without them. It follows that the universe must be a living being, endowed with sense and mind and reason: and so by this argument too we may infer that the universe is God.

‘But this I shall shortly prove more clearly from the works of the universe itself. In the meantime I beseech you, Velleius, not to expose further your complete ignorance of science. You say that a cone or a cylinder or a pyramid seems to you more beautiful than a sphere. In this you show some novelty in your aesthetic judgement! But let us suppose these other shapes are more beautiful, in appearance at least, although I do not think so. For what can be more beautiful than the shape which alone contains and includes all others? A shape which has in it no irregularity, nothing to offend, no sharp angles, no bends, no protrusions, no concavity or deficiency of any kind? There are in fact two pre-eminent shapes: among solids the solid globe, or “sphere” (*sphaera*) as it is called in Greek, and among plane figures the round or orb, or “circle” (*kyklos*) as the Greeks would say. These are the only two shapes in which all the parts are similar one to another and the centre is at an equal distance from every point on the circumference, the model of perfect symmetry. But if you cannot see this, because you have never stooped to learn from the dust,^{*} then perhaps you have at least a sufficient smattering of physics to understand that no other shape could preserve such uniformity of motion and regularity in orbit? So that nothing could be more unscientific than the theory which you proclaim when you say that it is not certain that the world is round and it may have some other shape, and there are innumerable worlds, all variously formed: a proposition which Epicurus could never have propounded, if he had ever learned that

twice two is four. But he was too busy filling his own mouth ever to look up (as Ennius says) into “the mouth of the sky”.

‘Now there are two kinds of stars.[†] One kind moves in constant courses from their rising to their setting, never wavering from their path. The other kind moves in two ways at once while preserving the same courses and orbits. Both of them reveal the rotation of the universe and the circular motion of the stars, which implies that the universe is spherical in form.

‘First of them all the sun, the emperor of the stars, moves in such a way that when he sheds his light far and wide on the earth first one part and then another is left in darkness. It is the interposition of the earth’s own shadow which veils the sunlight and brings on the night. And so we have the uniform procession of the days and nights. In the same way the slight approach to or recession of the sun from our earth controls the degree of heat or cold which we experience. The yearly cycle is made up of three hundred and sixty-five daily revolutions of the sun’s orbit, with six hours added. But the sun in its orbit swings now to the north and now to the south, bringing summer and winter in their turn, and spring and autumn. And from these four changing seasons derives the cause and origin of everything to which the earth or sea gives birth.

‘The annual course of the sun is overtaken by the monthly courses of the moon. The light of the moon is least when it is nearest to the sun and greatest when at its furthest distance from it. And not only does its apparent shape and form change, now waxing, and now gradually waning back again to its starting-point: but its position also, now to the north and now to the south. In the course of the moon there occurs also something analogous to the winter and summer solstices. And the moon gives out many emanations which influence the growth and nourishment of animals as well as the growth and ripening of all the plants which grow on earth.

‘Most wonderful of all are the movements of those five stars which are wrongly called “the planets” or wandering stars. For there is no “wandering” in a star which through all eternity preserves its constant progress and recession and all its other regular and measured movements. And it is even more wonderful in these stars which are now hidden, and then appear again: now approach and then recede: now precede, and then follow: move now faster and now slower: and on occasion do not move at all but remain stationary for a time. From the diverse movements of these stars the mathematicians have calculated what they call “the Great Year”.^{*} This is fulfilled when the sun and moon and these five stars complete their courses and return to the same relative positions which they had at the beginning. There is much disagreement about the length of this “Great Year”: but it is

certain that it must comprise a fixed and definite period. For the star which we call Saturn, and the Greeks ‘The Shining One’, and which is the furthest from the earth, completes its orbit in about thirty years. And in the course of this orbit it goes through a number of remarkable motions, now going forward and then hanging back again, now vanishing in the evening and appearing again at dawn: and through all the course of the ages there is no change in all these motions or the times in which they are completed. Below this star and nearer to the earth is Jupiter, which the Greeks call “The Blazing One”. Jupiter makes the same journey through the twelve signs of the zodiac in a period of twelve years, and its orbit shows diversities similar to those of Saturn. Next below this star is the nearer orbit of “The Fiery One”, which we call Mars. This completes a similar orbit, as I believe, in twenty-four months less six days. Below this is the star Mercury, which the Greeks call “The Gleaming One”. This completes its course through the signs of the zodiac in about a year and is never distant from the sun by more than a single sign, being sometimes ahead of it and sometimes behind it. The lowest of the five planets and the nearest to the earth is Venus, called “The Light Bearer” by the Greeks – Lucifer in Latin – when it appears in front of the sun: and when it follows the sun, Hesperus. Venus completes its orbit in a year, traversing the zodiac in a zig-zag movement as do the other four. It is never distant more than two signs of the zodiac from the sun, sometimes ahead of it, sometimes behind it.

‘I cannot understand this regularity in the stars, this harmony of time and motion in their various orbits through all eternity, except as the expression of reason, mind and purpose in the planets themselves, which we must therefore reckon in the number of the gods.

‘Those which we call the fixed stars show the same evidence of mind and purpose. They too in their daily revolution keep a constant regularity. They are not carried along by the aether, or as a part of the general movement of the sky, as is taught by many who are ignorant of physics. The nature of the aether is not such as to enable it to hold the stars in its embrace and to cause them to revolve through the power of its own motion. The aether is too subtle and translucent and too equable in its temperature to be the material setting of the stars. The fixed stars have their own sphere, remote and free from any influence of the aether. Their constant and eternal motion, wonderful and mysterious in its regularity, declares the indwelling power of a divine intelligence. If any man cannot feel the power of God when he looks upon the stars, then I doubt whether he is capable of any feeling at all.

‘In the heavens there is nothing accidental, nothing arbitrary, nothing out of order, nothing erratic. Everywhere is order, truth,

reason, constancy. Those things which lack these qualities – all that is false and delusive and full of error – such things either circle the earth below the orbit of the moon (the lowest of the heavenly bodies) or have their being upon the earth itself. But from the mysterious order and enduring wonder of the heavens flows all saving power and grace. If anyone thinks it mindless then he himself must be out of his mind.

‘I therefore believe I shall not go wrong in taking my lead from Zeno, who was the first to seek out the truth of this matter. Zeno defines nature as “a creative fire which goes its own way, as an artist does, to bring its works to birth”. In his opinion the essence of all art is creation. Our artists construct their works by the skill of their hands. Nature does the same but in a fashion far more subtle. Nature is a creative fire and the teacher of all the other arts. She is herself a creative artist. In each of her creations she follows her own path and her own principles. But Nature in the universe as a whole, which holds and encompasses everything in its embrace, is not an artist only but the master-artist, from whose plan and providence springs all the harvest of the times and seasons. Finite natures are born of their own seeds and grow each within the limits of their own form, but the infinite Nature of the universe as a whole is the original source of all freedom and all movement and acts in accordance with its own strivings and desires (which the Greeks call “hormae”), just as we are moved to action by our own minds and senses. Such is the nature of the moving spirit of the universe, so that it may properly be called the divine wisdom or providence (“pronoia” in the Greek), which has formed the world to endure and lack for nothing and to abound in all grace and beauty.

‘I have spoken about the universe as a whole and I have also spoken about the stars, so that you may see that there exist a number of divine beings who are not idle but at the same time do not have to achieve their purposes by dint of hard and irksome toil. They are not made of veins and nerves and bones. They are not nourished by food and drink as we are, to produce too gross or too thin a composition of humours in their bodies. Indeed they have no bodies such as ours, vulnerable to accident and injury. They need not fear that their strength will be wasted by disease. It was fear of these things which led Epicurus to invent his shadowy gods who do nothing. But the gods in which we believe are clothed in the most beautiful of forms and dwell in the purest regions of the heavens and are so borne along in their orderly courses as to produce a harmony which preserves and protects us all.

‘There are also many other aspects of divinity which have been rightly named and recognized, in accordance with the great benefits which they confer, by the wisest men of Greece and by our own

ancestors. Indeed, whatever brought great benefit to the human race they thought to be the expression of some divine benevolence towards mankind. So they named the various gifts of the gods* as though they were gods in their own right. For example, we call the corn “Ceres” and the wine “Liber”, as in the verse of Terence

Without Ceres and Liber love grows cold.

Or a quality which manifests some great power is itself named as a god, such as Faith and Reason, both of which we have actually seen consecrated in the Capitol by Marcus Aemilius Scaurus. There was also a previous consecration of Hope by Aulus Atilius Calatinus. You can see from here the temple of Virtue, restored as a temple of Honour by Marcus Marcellus, and originally consecrated many years ago in the time of the Ligurian War by Quintus Maximus. Wealth, Salvation, Concord, Liberty, Victory – all of these, on account of their great power, which seemed to demand a divine origin, have been named as gods. In the same way Desire, Pleasure, Lust have been deified. But these are perverse and sophisticated vices rather than natural emotions, even if Velleius thinks otherwise. But often such vicious and artificial pleasures can overcome our more natural instincts.

‘As each divine power confers its own benefits, so it is recognized as a god in accordance with the importance of the benefits which it confers, and the power which resides in each of the gods is expressed in their names, as in the examples I have given.

‘The common custom of our human life has also brought it about that men who have conferred outstanding benefits upon mankind have been deified out of gratitude. Hence the deification of Hercules, of Castor and Pollux, of Aesculapius and of Liber. I mean here Liber the son of Semele and not the Liber to whom our ancestors paid such solemn and sacred reverence together with Ceres and Libera. The nature of that worship is revealed only in the mysteries. Here Liber and Libera were so named as the offspring of Ceres, from our word “liberi” meaning “children” – a usage which has remained in the case of Libera but not of Liber. This is the origin, too, of the deification of Romulus, whom some identify with Quirinus. All these benefactors were duly honoured as gods blessed and immortal whose spirits would endure and flourish to eternity.

‘A great number of gods have also been derived from scientific theories about the world of nature. Endowed with human shapes, they have provided fables for the poets and have permeated human life with every form of superstition. This subject has been treated by Zeno and explained at greater length by Cleanthes and Chrysippus. For example, it was an old legend of the Greeks that the Sky-God* was

mutilated by his son Saturn and that Saturn in his turn was made captive by his son Jupiter. These impious tales are merely the picturesque disguise of a sophisticated scientific theory. Those who invented them felt that the high, aethereal and fiery nature of the Sky-God should have no use for those parts of the body which require intercourse with another to beget a child.

‘Men have believed it to be Saturn who rules the cyclic courses of the times and seasons. In Greek the nature of this god is expressed in his name. He is called Kronos, which is the same as Chronos, and means a lapse of time, just as our Roman name “Saturn” means “sated with years”. In mythology he is said to have devoured his own children, just as age eats up the passing years and is fed but never satiated as the years go by. He is said to have been put in chains by Jupiter to restrain his boundless course and to bind him in the network of the stars.

‘The name of Jupiter himself means “helping father”. With a change of inflexion he is also called “Jove”, from “iuvare” (to help). The poets call him “the father of gods and men”. Our ancestors knew him as “the most excellent” and “the most high”. We should note that they set his excellence, that is his grace, before his power. They saw that it was in truth a greater and more generous thing to help the whole creation than to be omnipotent. Ennius calls upon him in this aspect in the verse I have already quoted:

Lift up your eyes to that bright firmament,
Which men call Jupiter

and less clearly in another line:

Now by whatever power sheds daylight from the sky,
By that power will I curse this man!

Our soothsayers refer thunder and lightning to Jupiter, saying “Jupiter lightens” or “Jupiter thunders”. Euripides tersely expresses the same thought with his usual vigour in the verses:

See now the boundless heaven spread on high,
Which folds the earth in fond embrace,
And know there Jupiter, the god supreme.*

‘The air, however, as the Stoics argue, being interposed between the sea and the sky, is worshipped under the name belonging to Juno,[†] who is the sister and the wife of Jupiter. There is an affinity between the air and aether and they are closely linked together. The air was regarded as the softest and most feminine of the elements and was therefore assigned to Juno. This name, however, I believe to be

derived from “iuvare” (to help).

“There remained the water and the earth, making up the three legendary divisions of the world. The whole realm of the sea was given to Neptune, the brother of Jupiter, as they say. This name is derived from “nare” (to swim), with a slight change of the first letters and a suffix such as is seen in “Portunus” (the harbour-god), derived from “portus” (a harbour). The earth in all its power and plenty is sacred to Father Dis, a name which is the same as Dives, “The Wealthy One”, as is the Greek “Pluto”. This is because everything is born of the earth and returns to it again. Dis it was who is said to have married Proserpina, a name of Greek origin in the form “Persephone”. Proserpina is identified with the seed of the corn and hence comes the legend of her mother’s search for her when she had vanished below the earth. Her mother was named Ceres. This is a corruption of Geres, from “gero” (bear), because she is the bearer of the corn. The same accidental change of the first letter is also seen in her Greek name “Demeter” from “Ge Meter” (mother earth). Similarly the name Mavors is from “magna vertere” (to overturn the great) and the name of Minerva means either “She who levels down” or “She who threatens”.

‘As in everything it is the beginning and the end which are most important, they held that Janus is the leader in every sacrifice, and derived the name from “ire” (to go). Hence the name “jani” for archways and “januae” for the portals of secular buildings. The name of Vesta is derived from the Greeks, who call her Hestia. This is the goddess who presides over our hearths and altars. We always make our last prayers and sacrifices to this goddess, who is the guardian of our most private lives. In close association with her divinity are the household gods, the Penates, whose name may be derived from the word “penus”, which we use to describe any store of human food, or “penitus”, meaning those who dwell within, in the recesses of the house, whence they are sometimes called “Penetrales” (the dwellers within) by the poets.

“The name of Apollo too is Greek and he is identified with the sun, just as Diana is identified with the moon. Sol (the sun) may have been so named from “solus” (alone), either because he is “alone” in his great size among the stars, or because he blots out all the others when he rises so that he “alone” is visible.

‘Luna (which is the same as “Lucina”) derives from “lucere” (to shine). Just as the Greeks call upon Diana in childbirth under the name of Lucifera (the light-bringer), so our women call upon Juno under the name of Lucina. She is also called Diana Omnivaga (the wandering one), not as a huntress but because she is numbered among the seven planets or “wandering” stars. She is called Diana because

she turns night into a sort of day.* She too is invoked in childbirth, because the embryo matures sometimes in seven moons but usually in nine. These are called “menses” (months) because they make up “mensa spatia” (measured periods).

‘Timaeus in his history had one of his amusing stories about this goddess Diana. He tells us that on the night when Alexander the Great was born, the temple of Diana at Ephesus was burnt to the ground, adding that it was not surprising as the goddess was away from home, as she no doubt wished to assist Olympias at the royal birth.

‘Our name for the goddess Venus means “She who comes (*venire*) to all”. Some say that it is derived from our word for charm and grace. But it is more likely that this word itself is derived from Venus.

‘You see then how sound and useful discoveries in the field of natural science have led to the attribution of fictitious powers to these imaginary gods. This has given rise to false beliefs, wild errors and all the stuff of old wives’ tales. We even think we know the appearance of the gods, their age, their costumes and their fashions! We even claim to know their family histories, their marriages and their relationships to one another, and in every way we reduce them to the stature of our human weakness. We represent them as distracted by our own passions. We are told about their lusts, their griefs and their bad temper. According to the legends they are even plagued by strife and war. We read in Homer how the gods took opposite sides in support of the rival armies of the Greeks and Trojans and even carried on their own private wars with the Titans and the Giants. These tales are full of frivolous absurdities and both those who tell them and those who listen to them are a pack of fools. But as long as we scorn and reject such fables, we may well believe that a divine power permeates everything in nature, the earth under the name of Ceres, the oceans under the name of Neptune, and so on. So we ought to worship and revere these gods, each in their own person and their own nature, under the names which custom has bestowed upon them. Such worship of the gods is the best of all things, full of purity and holiness and piety, if our reverence is always true and whole and pure in word and thought. It was not only the philosophers but also our own ancestors who thus distinguished between true religion and the follies of superstition.

‘People who prayed and sacrificed all day long that their children might live to survive them were called superstitious (from “superstes”, a survivor), although the word later acquired a wider sense. But those who scrupulously observed and repeated all the ritual belonging to the worship of the gods were called religious, from the verb “relegere” (to read again and again)....* Today superstition and religion have become in the one case a term of contempt and in the other of respect.

‘Well, I have now said enough, I think, to show that the gods exist and to explain what manner of beings they are. I must now explain how the world is governed by their providence. This is a great question and one which has been hotly contested, Cotta, by philosophers of your school. So it is you whom I must answer here. Men of your school, Velleius, are less conversant with the sense in which these terms are used. You admire yourselves so much that you read only your own works. All others you condemn unheard. For instance, you said that we Stoics believe in “that old fortune-teller Providence”.[†] You fell into this error because you imagine that the Stoics have invented Providence as just another goddess, one who guides and governs the whole world. This error arises from our use of a compressed form of words. If someone says that the Republic of Athens is governed by the Council, we must understand him to mean, by the Council of the Areopagus. Similarly; when we say that the world is governed by Providence, we must be understood to mean that it is governed by the providence of the gods. So do not waste such meagre wit as your school possesses in poking fun at us in this way. Indeed I would advise you to give up any attempt at humour. It does not suit you and in any case you are no good at it and your arrows miss the mark. The defect is not in you personally, Velleius, for your manners are worthy of your birth and you have the urbanity of a true citizen of Rome. It lies in your fellow-Epicureans and most of all in him who spawned all this, a man ignorant and uneducated, who insults everyone and lacks a single spark of wit or dignity or charm.

‘My belief is that the universe and everything in it has been created by the providence of the gods and is governed by their providence through all eternity. The philosophers of our school usually divide the proof of this into three parts. The first derives from the same argument by which we prove that the gods exist. If you grant their existence, you must admit that the world is governed by their providence. In the second part we show that all things are ordered by a sentient natural power, impelling them towards their own perfection. When this has been established, it follows that in everything from the beginning there have been the seeds of life. Our third proof we derive from all the wonders of the earth and sky. So you must either deny that the gods exist at all, as Democritus and Epicurus did in their own way by reducing them to “phantom images”: or else, if you admit their existence, you must also admit that they are active in the highest sense. What could be better than that their activity should be the government of the world? Therefore the world is governed by the wisdom of the gods.

‘If it were otherwise, it would follow that there must be some power better and stronger than that of the gods, whatever this might be,

inanimate matter or the great blind forces of necessity, which have created all these wonderful works that we see around us. In that event the nature of the gods would not be supreme in excellence. It would be subject to that other nature or necessity which ruled the earth and sky and sea. But nothing is more excellent than the divine and to divinity must belong the government of the world. God is not subject to obey the laws of nature. It is nature that is subject to the laws of God.

‘If we admit that there exist beings of divine wisdom, then we cannot exclude the working of their providence in the great design of the universe. Or are they unaware of what is of importance and of how such matters should be ordered? Or too weak perhaps to undertake and sustain such great responsibilities? But such ignorance would be contrary to the nature of the gods and it is not in accordance with their majesty and power that they should be too weak to sustain without effort the burden of their office. From which it follows, as we seek to prove, that the world is governed by the wisdom and the foresight of the gods.

‘If gods exist (and they do exist) then to be gods they must be living beings. But not only living beings. They must also be rational beings, joined one with another in a sort of peaceful and harmonious commonwealth, ruling the world as though it were a single state or city. There must be found among them the virtues which men recognize in truth and reason. The same law too which seeks to foster justice and expel evil. From this we can see that it is from the gods that wisdom and good sense are given to men. In recognition of this it was the custom of our ancestors to pay divine honours to Reason, Faith, Virtue and Concord. How can we deny these qualities to the gods when we bow in prayer before their sublime and holy images? If Reason, Faith, Virtue and Concord are to be found among men, whence can they have come down to earth but from the gods? Since we have some measure of sense, rationality and wisdom, the gods must have them in far greater measure. They must not only have them but use them too in the greatest and most admirable works. Now there is nothing greater or more wonderful than the universe as a whole. Therefore it must be governed by the wisdom and the foresight of the gods.

‘As I have shown the divinity of those mighty powers and marvellous phenomena which we see in the heavens – the sun and moon and planets and the fixed stars and the sky, and the world itself with the abundance of all that it contains, which are of such great use and benefit to man – the conclusion must be that all things are governed by the divine will and providence. This is all that I need say then on the first part of my proof.

‘I must now show that all things are subject to the laws of nature, by which they are ordered in the best possible way. But first I must briefly explain what I mean by nature, so that what I have to say may be more easily understood. Some regard nature as an irrational force which merely imparts a mechanical motion to material bodies. But others hold it to be a principle of reason and order, which pursues its own methodical course, exhibiting in everything the principle of cause and effect. There is no art, no skill, no human craftsmanship which can imitate or reproduce the subtlety of nature. They point out that the potency of a tiny seed is such that if it falls into a substance which accepts and embraces it, and acquires the matter by which it may grow and be nourished, it shapes and produces creatures after its own kind. In some cases it is nourished only from its own roots. In others it can move and feel and will and beget other organisms similar to itself.

‘There are others, such as Epicurus, who use the term “nature” to mean everything which exists, and derive the whole natural process from the movements of material bodies in a void. But when we Stoics say that the universe is formed and governed by nature, we do not mean that it is just stuck together mechanically, like a lump of earth or a piece of stone or something of that sort, but organically, like a tree or an animal, in which there is nothing haphazard but an appearance of order which is akin to art.

‘As those organisms which have their roots in the earth live and flourish through this art of nature, so the earth itself is permeated by the same force and when fertilized by seed it brings forth everything in profusion. In its embrace it makes their roots to grow and flourish, while the earth itself is nourished by higher natures from without. Vapour rising from the earth feeds the air and the aether and all the heavenly sphere. As nature permeates and stimulates the earth, so it is throughout the whole universe. Vegetables are rooted in the earth, animals are sustained by breathing air, and air is a part of our seeing and hearing and speaking. None of these would be possible without it. It is even the partner of our movements. When we move in any direction, it seems as it were to yield and give way before us. Some substances are carried to the centre or lowest part of the universe: others are carried up from the centre to the highest parts: while others are carried around the centre in a circular movement. But all of them together comprise a single nature and a universal continuum.

‘There are four basic substances and universal nature is merely the process of their continual transformation. Water is formed from earth. Air is formed from water. Aether is formed from air. Then the process is reversed and from aether comes air, from air water, from water earth, the lowest of the elements. So the harmony of the universe in all its parts derives from these natural elements, of which all things

are made, in their movement up and down and to and fro. This universal harmony must either continue to all eternity, as we see it now displayed before our eyes, or at least endure for a long and almost infinite period of time.

‘However this may be, nature is still the power which rules the universe. No lesser harmony is so complete. Navigation of a fleet or deployment of an army, or (to keep our comparison within the operations of nature herself) the growth of vines or trees, or even the shape of living creatures and the harmony of their limbs – none of these shows such art of nature as does the universe as a whole.

‘If then this universe is not governed by a conscious natural power, then nothing is governed by such a power. But as the universe contains all other natures and their seeds, must it not itself be governed by nature? Otherwise it would be as though one should say that a man’s teeth or the hair on his body were caused by nature but that the whole man, to whom they belong, was not a natural creature. Such an assertion would imply that the nature which creates may be itself inferior to its own creation.

‘The universe itself is the origin, seed and parent, so to speak, of everything which is subject to the natural law. It nourishes and embraces all things as a body does its own limbs and parts. But if the parts of the universe are subject to the law of nature, then the universe itself must be subject to this law. Now in this law of nature there is nothing which can be criticized. It develops the fullest possibilities of the whole natural world. Can anyone prove that nature could have done better? No one will ever prove it. If anyone tried to improve anything in the natural world, he would either make it worse or else attempt the impossible. All the parts of the world are so made that they could not be better adapted to their use or more beautiful to see.

‘Let us consider now whether all this is accidental, or whether the whole world is so constituted that it could not hold together without the guiding spirit of divine providence. If the works of nature are more perfect than the works of art then, as art achieves nothing without a conscious purpose, nature itself cannot be thought to be devoid of such a purpose. When you look at a picture or a statue, you recognize that it is a work of art. When you follow from afar the course of a ship, upon the sea, you do not question that its movement is guided by a skilled intelligence. When you see a sundial or a water-clock, you see that it tells the time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence, when it embraces everything, including these artefacts themselves and their artificers? Our friend Posidonius as you know has recently made a globe which in its revolution shows

the movements of the sun and stars and planets, by day and night, just as they appear in the sky. Now if someone were to take this globe and show it to the people of Britain or Scythia would a single one of those barbarians fail to see that it was the product of a conscious intelligence?

‘Our opponents however profess to be in doubt whether the universe, the source and origin of all things, came into being by accident or by necessity or is the product of a divine intelligence. They imagine that Archimedes showed greater powers by imitating the motions of the heavenly bodies in a model than nature does in bringing them about. Yet the real motions are many times more subtle than his imitation of them.

‘Do you remember the shepherd, in the poem of Accius,* who had never seen a ship in his life? When from a hill-top he saw far out at sea the new and wonderful ship of the Argonauts, he was amazed and cried out in alarm:

... What mass is this that glides
Terrible from the deep, with a great sound
And ripple, as the waves roll on before.
It stirs up whirlpools as it rushes on.
Sometimes it rolls on like a ragged cloud,
Sometimes is hurled aloft, like some great rock
Tossed up by wind and storm or like the swirl
Of waterspouts impelled by clashing waves.
Is it some flotsam driven from the shore?
Or has some Triton with his trident sharp
Forked up a cavern from beneath the sea,
Uprooting it out of the foamy depths,
And flung its rocky mass from sea to sky?

‘The shepherd cannot make out at first the nature of this object which he sees for the first time. But then he sees the young sailors aboard and hears their songs, “as when the eager dolphins sport around the prow” and so on, and he says:

A sound comes to my ears across the waters
Like the piping of Silvanus in the woods.

‘So we see that at first he thought he was looking at something quite inanimate and devoid of sense. But with fresh evidence he begins to suspect the true nature of this mysterious object. In the same way the philosophers, if they are confused at first by the aspect of the world, should go on to consider its measured and regular movements, to ponder how everything is governed by fixed laws which are constant

and immutable, and so come to understand that there is not only someone living in this divine and celestial house but that he who lives in it is also its lord and master and as it were the architect of this his own most splendid palace.

‘But as it is they seem to me to have no idea of the marvels of the earth and sky. First we have the earth, situated in the centre of the universe, and surrounded on every side by this element of life and breath which we call “air”.^{*} This in its turn is girdled by the immensities of the aether, which is the very essence of the heavenly fire.^{*} From the aether has been born the innumerable splendour of the stars. Of these the chief is the sun, which lights up the whole world with its brilliance, being far greater and larger than the earth. Then come the other stars in their immeasurable orders of magnitude. But all this multitude and immensity of fiery stars not only does not harm the earth and its inhabitants but is so adjusted for their benefit that if they were moved from their places the earth would be consumed by their heat, which would no longer be moderate and temperate as now.

‘Is it not a wonder that anyone can bring himself to believe that a number of solid and separate particles by their chance collisions and moved only by the force of their own weight could bring into being so marvellous and beautiful a world? If anybody thinks that this is possible, I do not see why he should not think that if an infinite number of examples of the twenty-one letters of the alphabet, made of gold or what you will, were shaken together and poured out on the ground it would be possible for them to fall so as to spell out, say, the whole text of the *Annals* of Ennius. In fact I doubt whether chance would permit them to spell out a single verse!

‘So how can these people bring themselves to assert that the universe has been created by the blind and accidental collisions of inanimate particles devoid of colour or any other quality? And even to assert that an infinite number of such worlds are coming into being and passing away all the time. If these chance collisions of atoms can make a world, why cannot they build a porch, or a temple, or a house or a city? A much easier and less laborious task.

‘In fact these people talk such nonsense about the universe that I wonder whether they have ever lifted their eyes to the glory of the skies above their heads, which I shall next consider. Aristotle put it well.^{*}

Let us imagine a race of men who have always lived beneath the earth in fair and noble dwellings, beautified with paintings and statues and furnished with everything requisite to wealth and the blessings that wealth can bring. Let us imagine that these men have never come up to the surface of the earth but have heard by rumour and hearsay of the existence of the divine kingdom of the gods. Then let us imagine that at some point of time the jaws of the earth were opened and they were able to

escape and come forth from those hidden abodes of theirs into the places where we live. When all at once they saw the land and sea and sky, beheld the majesty of the clouds and felt the power of the wind, and looked at the sun in its splendour, and came to understand its power, how it brought daylight to the world and shed its light across the sky: then, when night cast its shadow over the earth, they saw the whole heaven bright and glorious with stars, the varying brightness of the waxing and the waning moon, the rising and the setting of these heavenly bodies, and their sure and changeless course through all eternity. When they saw all these things, would they not be immediately convinced of the existence of the gods and that all these wonders were their handiwork?

‘That is how Aristotle saw it. But let us make our own picture. Let us imagine a cloak of darkness such as that with which the eruption of the volcano of Etna is said to have shadowed all the lands around. For two whole days no one could recognize his neighbour, and when on the third day the sun broke through, men felt as though they were all risen from the dead. Now suppose this were to happen to men who had passed their whole lives in darkness, so that they suddenly for the first time saw the light of day. How would the heavens look to them? From daily habit our eyes and minds have become accustomed to this sight and we no longer wonder at it, or seek a reason for something we have always known. In our folly we become incurious about anything, however marvellous, if it is not new. But can there be any man worthy of the name who can consider the regular movements of the heavenly bodies, the prescribed courses of the stars, and see how all is linked and bound into a single system, and then deny that there is any conscious purpose in this and say that it is all the work of chance?

‘The truth is that it is controlled by a power and purpose which we can never imitate. When we see some example of a mechanism, such as a globe or clock or some such device, do we doubt that it is the creation of a conscious intelligence? So when we see the movement of the heavenly bodies, the speed of their revolution, and the way in which they regularly run their annual course, so that all that depends upon them is preserved and prospers, how can we doubt that these too are not only the works of reason but of a reason which is perfect and divine? So let us put aside all casuistry of argument and simply let our eyes confess the splendour of the world, this world which we affirm to be the creation of the providence of God.

‘Let us look first at the panorama of our own world which is set in the middle of the universe, a solid globe, drawn in upon itself by its own gravity, and clothed with flowers and herbs and trees and fruits, whose number is beyond belief and whose variety is without end. Look next at the cool perennial streams, the clear waters of the rivers, their banks all robed in living green, the depths of the hollow caves, the rugged cliffs, the heights of the overhanging mountains, the

vastness of the open plains. Think too of the hidden veins of gold and silver and the boundless treasure-house of marble! Think of all the various kinds of animals, both tame and wild! Think of the flight and song of birds! Think of the grazing flocks and herds and the woodlands full of life!

‘Then think of the human race, who have been appointed, as it were, to be the gardeners of the earth, who will not permit it to become a savage haunt of monstrous beasts or a wilderness of thorny scrub. Under their hands the lands, the islands and the shores shine out, decked with their buildings and their cities.

‘If we could see all this panorama in a single glance with our eyes, as we can in thought, I believe that nobody, seeing thus the whole wide world, could doubt the handiwork of God.

‘Think also of the beauty of the sea, in the vastness of its oceans and the variety of its many islands. Think of the beauties of its shores and coasts! Think of all the different species of sea-creatures, some living under the water, some floating or swimming, and the shell-fish clinging to the rocks! The sea caresses the earth as though enamoured of the shore, so that the two elements almost merge in one. After the sea, think of the air, and of the interchange of night and day! Sometimes the air is clear and fine and rises upward to the heavens. Sometimes it thickens to form clouds, collecting moisture which falls as quickening rain upon the earth. Sometimes it eddies hither and thither to produce the winds. It controls the annual rhythm of heat and cold, it bears up the bird on the wing and is the breath of life to all living creatures.

‘Finally there remains the aether, which encompasses and embraces all the rest, the furthest shore and boundary of the world. It is in this element that the fiery shapes of the heavens pursue their destined course in wondrous ways. The sun revolves around the earth, though it is many times as big. Its rising and its setting bring us night and day. Twice in the year, approaching or receding, it reaches opposite extremities of its orbit, and so alternately causes the face of the earth to frown with sadness or to smile with joy, so that the heavens and earth seem to rejoice together.

‘The moon, which our mathematicians have calculated to be more than half as big as the earth, moves through the same courses as the sun, sometimes nearer, sometimes further away, and it reflects upon the earth the light shed on it by the sun, a light that varies with its own phases. When the moon is directly below and opposite the sun, it totally obscures its radiance. Sometimes too the moon, when it is opposite the sun, passes into the shadow of the earth, so that its own light is suddenly eclipsed. In the same courses the planets circle round

the earth and in the same way they rise and set now quicker and now slower in their motion, and sometimes altogether still. What is there to be seen more beautiful and marvellous than this? Then comes the great concourse of the stars. Their constellations form such patterns in the sky that men have given them names derived from their resemblance to shapes and forms familiar to man.'

At this point Balbus looked at me and said: 'I would like now to quote some passages from the poem of Aratus* which our friend Cicero here translated into Latin verse while he was still almost a boy. The poem pleased me so much in his Latin version that I know much of it by heart.

'Well then, as our eyes bear constant witness, in unbroken regularity

The stars above us swiftly circle by
And day and night turn with the turning sky.

A mind which seeks to understand the eternal laws of nature can never tire of the contemplation of this heavenly pageant.

The world for ever on its axis rolls,
The furthest points whereof we call the poles.

Around the pole turn the constellations of the Bear, which never set. "The Greeks the smaller Cynosura call, The larger Helice."* The latter's brilliant stars are visible all through the night. Our countrymen call them the Seven Ploughing Oxen. The smaller constellation of Cynosura is made up of the same number of stars in a similar grouping and revolves around the same pole:

Phoenician sailors trust its light at sea,
Although the other may the brighter be,
And may at night be earlier seen to burn.
But this, although it may the smaller seem,
The seamen as a better guide esteem,
Because it circles in a shorter turn.

To add to the splendour of these constellations

Among them like a stream in rapid flow
The furious Dragon winds, above, below,
And coils his scaly length in many an arc and bow.

The Dragon is a marvellous sight in every way but especially remarkable is the shape of the head and the fiery eyes:

For not one star alone lights up his head

But by twin lights it is illuminéd
And double fires flash from his blazing eyes.
The fiery jaw another star implies.
The scaly head bends back towards the rear
And backward darts its glance towards the Bear.

The whole body of the Dragon is visible throughout the night, but

The head dips almost down below the ocean
Rising and setting in a mazy motion.

‘Near to the head of the Dragon circles “the phantom image of a weary, toiling man”, whom the Greeks call “The Man on his Knees”.

And where the kneeling figure tells its story
Nearby the Crown shines out in all its glory.

‘The Crown is behind him but near his head is another figure, the Serpent-Holder,

Ophiúcus his name in Grecian lands
Who holds the Snake imprisoned in his hands.
Whose scaly body, writhing into coils,
Enwraps the hero’s body in its toils.
He treads the Scorpion with all his power,
The neck that threatens and the eyes that glower.

Next to the constellation of the Bear we see

The Keeper of the Bear, whom many call
The Driver of the Bear. And why withal?
Because he seems to the observant eye
To drive the Bear in yoke across the sky.

And then:

Below his breast, set like a jewel in flame,
Arcturus flashes out his famous name.

And beneath his feet

The Virgin glorious with her radiant form
Stands bearing in her hands an ear of corn.

‘Does not the beauty of these pictures in their vast and orderly array
reveal to us the artistry of God?

By the Bear’s head you may descry the Twins:

Below him lies the Crab, who in his claw
Holds the great Lion, who flames a silent roar.

The Charioteer

Leaning beneath the Twins' left side his way
Pursues, whom Helice confronts with burning ray.
The Goat at his left shoulder makes her stay.

How does it go on?

The Goat shines brightly, splendid to the sight,
The Kids nearby send down a feebler light.

And beneath the feet of the Charioteer

The mighty Bull stands with his lowered horns,

his head bespangled by a cloud of stars, which the Greeks call the Hyades, the bringers of rain.* Behind the constellation of the Cynosura follows Cepheus with his outstretched hands, and close behind the Bear he wheels his course. In front of Cepheus comes

Cassiopeia with her dubious light
And close beside her, ever burning bright,
Andromeda flees in grief her mother's pain.
The Horse beside her shakes his fiery mane,
His flank beside her head. A single star
Thus beams a double image from afar,
And ties a knot eternal in the sky.
Next stands the Ram, his crooked horns awry.

And near him

The Fishes, of which one comes further forth
A little nearer to the brisk north.

At the feet of Andromeda you may descry Perseus,

Where blows the storm-wind from the northern pole.
At his left knee around about him roll
The Pleiades, shining with feeble ray.
The Lyre next, slightly sloping, meets the eye:
Near where the Bird goes winging through the sky.

'Near to the head of the Horse you may pick out the right hand of
Aquarius and then trace his whole shape, and next

Still puffing cold out of his sturdy breast
Goes Capricorn his way, a monstrous beast
Whom Titan lights with his perpetual beams,
As through his winter course his chariot gleams.

Next we may see

How Scorpio rearing upward all aglow
Behind his tail trails on the bended Bow,
Nearby the Bird glides onward through the skies
And at its side the fiery Eagle flies.

Then comes the Dolphin and

Orion stooping with his body bent

and following him

The glowing Dog Star furiously burns.

Next follows the Hare

And never tires her body of the run.
At the Dog's tail glides ever Argo on
(Surrounded by the Ram and scaly Fish)
And seems along the River's bank to swish.

One seems to see the river in its long and winding course and

In the zenith see the winding Chain
Which binds the Fishes by their tails amain.
Near to the Scorpion's sting you may descry
The Altar where the south winds softly sigh.

Not far away the Centaur

Subjects his horse's body to the Claws
While his right hand the Beast towards him draws:
And so he strides towards the Altar bright,
While Hydra rises from the nether night.

Among the coils of the Hydra

See in the midst the Cup resplendent glow,
And see the feathered body of the Crow,
With pecking beak. See, close below the Twins,
The star that with the Dog-Star vies, and wins.

‘Now I ask you whether any sane man can believe that all these constellations, all this glory of the sky, can have been created by the random movement of material atoms? Or that natural forces, devoid of mind or purpose, could create phenomena which not only could not come into existence except through a rational intelligence but the nature of which is so subtle that we must strain our reason to the utmost in the effort to comprehend their mysteries?’

‘All this is wonderful, but wonderful too is the stability of the universe, its coherence and endurance, which is perfect beyond our imagination. All its parts tend with an equal force towards the centre. Now all bodies remain best connected when they are bound together with a chain. In the universe this chain is nature itself, which pervades the whole and orders everything to a rational plan, turning and attracting all the outward parts towards the middle.

‘The world is a globe and so its parts are equally balanced in all directions. All the parts of our earth similarly tend towards the middle (for in a sphere the centre is as it were the lowest point) and there is nothing to disturb this mighty drive of weight and mass. In the same way the sea, which is above the earth, tends still towards the earth’s centre, and so is itself shaped in conformity to the globe of the earth and nowhere spills or overflows. Next above it is the air, which rises on high because of its lightness, and spreads out in all directions. It is continuous with the sea, to which it is joined, but its nature impels it upwards. Tempered by the mists and warmth of the sea, it provides the life-giving breath of living things. The air in its turn is encircled by the highest part of the heavens, which is called the aether. This retains its own subtle and fiery nature, with no admixture of the solid elements, and extends from the upward surface of the air.

‘As the stars move through the aether they too preserve their spherical form by the force of their own gravity, and it is their spherical shape which holds them safely in their orbits. For the sphere, as I have already explained,* is the shape least vulnerable to external accidents. They are also incandescent and their fire draws its nourishment from the vapours of the earth and sea and rivers, which rise from the fields and waters when they are heated by the sun. By these the stars, and indeed the whole aether, are nourished and refreshed. They then return these vapours to the earth, and draw them up anew.

‘In this process nothing is destroyed, or only a very little which is consumed by the fire of the stars and the flame of the aether.

‘The philosophers of our school believe that in the end it will come about (though Panaetius is said to have thought it doubtful) that the whole universe will be consumed in flame: because when all the water

is dried up, there will be no source from which air can be derived and nothing but fire will be left. From this divine fire a new universe will then be born and rise again in splendour.

‘But I must not dwell too long upon the system of the stars and planets. I will only add that the planets present a symphony of different motions, wherein Saturn above freezes with cold, Mars flames with fire in the middle, and between them Jupiter sheds his genial light. Below Mars are two others which are satellites of the sun. The sun itself sheds its radiance over the whole world, and the moon with its reflected light presides over pregnancies and births and brings all things to fruition in due season.

‘Who cannot wonder at this harmony of things, at this symphony of nature which seems to will the well-being of the world? If there is such a man, then I am very sure that he has never thought upon these things.

‘If we turn now from heavenly to earthly things, we find everywhere similar signs of a purposive intelligence in nature. The plants which grow in the soil have stocks which give them stability and strength and at the same time draw from the soil the juices by which the plant is fed through its roots. The trunks of trees are covered with a bark or rind, to shield them from the heat and cold. Vines clutch at their props with tendrils like tiny hands and so pull themselves aloft like climbing animals. And if cabbages are planted near them, they are said to shrink away as from something noisome and injurious, and will not suffer any contact with them.

‘Think too of all the different animals. What power is it which preserves them all according to their kind? Some are covered with hides, some are clothed in shaggy coats, and some with prickly spines. Others are robed in feathers or in scales. Some are armed with horns: others can seek safety in flight. Nature has also provided variously and abundantly the food which is suitable for each.

‘I could also explain how in every way they are most subtly and cunningly designed to catch and digest their food, and describe the marvellous construction of their bodies. All their internal organs are so formed and placed that there is nothing superfluous, nothing which is not necessary for the maintenance of life.

‘Nature has given to animals both sense and appetite – the appetite to seek their natural food, the sense to distinguish what is good for them from what is not. Some animals catch their food by running, some by crawling, others by flying or swimming. Some seize it with teeth and jaws, some snatch and hold it in their claws, or in their curving beaks. Some suck their food, others pluck it: some bolt it, others chew it. Some are so small that they can easily pick it from the

earth with their beaks, while those which are taller, such as geese, swans, cranes or camels, are provided with long necks. The elephant even has a trunk, as otherwise the size of his body would make it difficult for him to reach his food.

‘To those animals which feed on animals of another kind nature has given either strength or speed. To each too is given its own skill and cunning. Take the spiders for instance. Some build a kind of net and eat whatever is caught in it. Others lie in ambush to seize and devour whatever comes their way. One of the shell-fishes, which has two wide flat shells, gets its food by entering into an alliance with a small squill. When a small fish swims inside the gaping shell, the squill with a bite signals it to close it. So two very different creatures combine to seek their food together. It is a question whether this comes about from some agreement between the two or whether their natures are one from the beginning. Marvellous too are those aquatic creatures which are born on land. Such are the crocodiles and the river-tortoises, and some water-snakes, which are born on land but seek the water as soon as they can move. Then too we often get hens to sit on the eggs of ducks, and at first they feed them as though they were their own chicks which they had hatched and cherished. But as soon as the young ducks catch sight of water, they leave the hen and run towards it as towards their natural home. Such an instinct of self-preservation has nature implanted in all living creatures.

‘I have read somewhere* that there is a bird called the spoonbill which, when it is hungry, flies after other birds as they dive into the sea for fish. When one of them comes up with a fish in its beak, the spoonbill attacks it about the head until it drops its catch and lets him have it for himself. The same bird is also said to gorge itself with shell-fish and then, when they have been predigested in the heat of its stomach, regurgitates them and selects those which are good to eat. Sea-frogs too are said to cover themselves with sand when they creep along the water’s edge. When fish come near and take the bait, they are killed and eaten by the frogs. Kites carry on a kind of natural vendetta with crows. Whenever they come across each others’ eggs, they smash them up. Among the many such remarkable natural phenomena observed by Aristotle is the way in which geese, when they migrate across the sea to warmer climes, adopt a triangular formation. The leading angle of this formation cuts the air in front of them, so that it slips away along the sides of the triangle. In this way their flight is made a good deal easier and their wings are banked like oars along the sides of a ship. The base of the triangle, like the stern of a ship, offers a surface to a following wind. In this way the birds who are flying in the rear are able to rest their necks and heads on the backs of those in front. The leader cannot do this, as there is none for

him to lean on. So when he is tired he flies around to the rear and one of the birds which is already rested takes his place. So they take turn and turn about throughout their journey. I could give many other examples but these are sufficient for my argument. And you will all know the way in which animals look always to their own safety, always alert when feeding and when sleeping, well concealed within their lairs.

‘Is it not remarkable how dogs cure their own digestive troubles by vomiting and the Egyptian ibis by purging – methods of treatment which our medical practitioners have only discovered in the last few generations? I have also heard that panthers, in countries where they are trapped with poisoned meat, know of a certain antidote, and if they can discover some of it in time they do not die. And that wild goats in Crete, if they have been wounded by a poisoned arrow, seek out a herb called dittany. As soon as they eat this, the arrows drop out of their body. Hinds, shortly before they give birth to their young, purge themselves with a certain herb called hartwort. We see too how animals defend themselves against force and intimidation each with its own weapons. Bulls use their horns, boars their tusks and lions their teeth. Others save themselves by flight or concealment. The cuttlefish exudes a dark liquid. The sting-ray emits a numbing shock. Many creatures repel pursuers by giving off a rank and intolerable smell.

‘The providence of God has made wise provision for the preservation of the whole fabric of the world and for the perpetuation of all kinds of animals and trees and every plant that grows upon the earth. In all of these there is a seed which enables many to be born of one. This seed is concealed deep in the fruit of every tree. The fruit satisfies the hunger of man and the earth is filled with new generations of the tree. The same wisdom provides for the preservation of every kind of beast. Their division into males and females has been devised by nature for the propagation of their kind. They have parts of the body perfectly adapted for begetting and conceiving, and both male and female have a strong desire for physical union. Then, when the seed is planted in its place, it draws almost all the nourishment to itself and so builds up the embryo within the womb. When the child is born, almost all the food of the mother is turned into milk and the new-born creature seeks the mother’s breast by instinct, without need of guidance, and fills itself from her abundance. Animals which give birth to a number of young at one time, such as pigs and dogs, have also a number of teats, while animals which do not, have few. This again shows that there is nothing accidental here, but that everything is ordered by the wise providence of nature. Look too at the care of animals in guarding and

teaching their young, until they are able to fend for themselves. Fish however, we are told, abandon their eggs as soon as they are laid because they can easily float on their own in the water till the young emerge.

‘It is said that tortoises and crocodiles, when they have laid their eggs, just cover them with earth and leave them to hatch out and grow up on their own. Hens and other birds seek a quiet place to build their nests and lay their eggs and line the nest as softly as possible to keep them safe and warm. When they have hatched their young, they protect them from the cold by covering them with their wings and shade them also from the heat of the sun. As soon as the young can use their fledgling wings, the mothers guide them in flight but otherwise leave them on their own.

‘The work and skill of man also provides for the protection of some animals and plants and indeed there are many which could not survive without human care. Marvellous opportunities too for the cultivation of plenty are offered to man by nature in various parts of the world. Egypt is watered by the Nile, and after it has been covered by the summer floods the waters recede in autumn and leave the land soft and rich for sowing. The Euphrates fertilizes Mesopotamia and as it were re-creates the land each year. The Indus, the greatest of all rivers, not only refreshes and softens the earth with its waters but even sows it with a great mass of cornlike seeds which it carries on its stream. There are many similar examples I could cite in other places of the way in which the earth is enriched to bear its various fruits.

‘How kindly too is nature in the pleasant variety of food which she provides at different seasons of the year, so that we have the pleasures of change and plenty! How welcome are the Etesian winds, which temper the excessive heat of summer, bringing health to men and to the flocks and herds and every living thing! They also give a safe and speedy voyage to the sailor. I must pass over many other examples although plenty could be given. I could not catalogue all the bounty of the rivers, the rise and fall of ocean tides, the mountains robed with trees, salt-beds far remote from any sea, the richness of the earth in healing drugs, the numberless devices necessary to our lives and nourishment. The alternation too of night and day preserves all living creatures, giving a time for action and a time for rest.

‘From all these arguments we must conclude that everything in the world is marvellously ordered by divine providence and wisdom for the safety and protection of us all.

‘Someone may ask “But for whose sake has this mighty work of creation been undertaken?” For the sake of the trees and plants? But this would be absurd, for though they are sustained by nature they are

devoid of sense or feeling. For the sake of the animals then? But it seems no more likely that the gods would have undertaken so great a labour for dumb creatures who have no understanding. For whom then shall we say the world was made? Surely for those living creatures who are endowed with reason. These are gods and men, who excel all other creatures. For reason is the highest attribute of all. We may therefore well believe that the world and everything in it has been created for the gods and for mankind.

‘The care of the immortal gods for Man is more easily understood if we consider the whole making of a man, the whole shaping and perfection of a human being. Animal life has three prime needs: food, drink and air.

‘The mouth is adapted to take in all of these, with the assistance of the nostrils for the air. It is set with teeth for biting, and to chew and soften the food. The front teeth are sharp to bite and divide. The back teeth, which we call the molars, grind up the food and this process seems to be assisted by the tongue. The gullet is continuous with the roots of the tongue and is the first to receive whatever is taken into the mouth. At either side of the mouth it is adjacent to the tonsils and reaches as far as the rear or innermost part of the palate.

‘The gullet receives the food which has been driven and as it were pushed down into it by the quick movements of the tongue, and itself again drives it downward. The part of the gullet below the food dilates, while the part above it contracts.

‘The entrance of the windpipe is joined to the roots of the tongue, a little above the junction of the tongue with the gullet, and the windpipe reaches downward to the lungs. It receives the vitalizing air which we draw in with our breath, which is afterwards breathed out again from the lungs. The windpipe is protected by a kind of cover, which is there to ensure that breathing should not be blocked by any accidental intake of food.

‘Beneath the gullet the stomach acts as a receptacle to take in all that we eat or drink, while the heart and lungs take in the air. Many marvellous processes take place in the stomach, which is a muscular complex, coiled and winding so as to hold and compress the dry or moist food which it receives, so that it can be assimilated through the digestive process. The stomach is now tense and now relaxed, to press and mix together everything which it receives. In this way all our food is easily digested and consumed by the heat which is generated in the digestive processes and from the air we breathe, and the nourishment is then distributed throughout the body.

‘The lungs are soft and porous and so adapted to inhale the air. They contract to exhale and dilate to inhale, and so maintain a

continuous supply of the vital element which is the first requirement of animal life.

‘From the food the stomach secretes a nourishing juice, which reaches the liver from the intestines by certain ducts leading directly to “the gates of the liver”, as they are called, which extend to the liver itself and join with it. From the liver there extend other ducts, through which the nourishment descends when it has left the liver. When the bile has been extracted from it (and the liquid which is afterwards discharged from the kidneys) what remains of the food is converted into blood and flows back again to those “gates of the liver” to which all the ducts return. Passing through these it is there poured into the “vena cava” (hollow vein), as it is called, and so arrives fully digested at the heart. The heart then distributes it through a network of veins to the whole body and to every part.

‘How the waste of the food is expelled by the contractions and relaxations of the bowels is easily explained but it would perhaps not be in good taste to go into details about it here.

‘So let me rather emphasize the following wonder of our natural body. The air which we draw into our lungs when we breathe is warmed in the act of breathing and by contact with the lungs. Part of this air is expelled again when we exhale and part is received into one of the ventricles of the heart. Into the other ventricle there flows blood from the liver through the “vena cava” which I have already mentioned. So from these organs the blood is diffused through the whole body through the veins, and the air through the arteries. A great number of veins and arteries are densely interwoven through the whole body and bear witness to the marvellous power of the work of the divine artificer.

‘Then there are the bones, which form a marvellously jointed framework for the body, so designed as to give stability and form to our limbs and to provide for every form of movement and bodily activity.

‘And finally there are the sinews which bind our joints together and intertwine one with another through the whole body. These like the veins and arteries radiate outwards from the heart throughout the body.

‘I could cite many other examples of the wise and careful providence of nature, which show the great and gracious benefits which the gods have conferred upon mankind. Nature has lifted them up from the earth and made them straight and upright, so that they can look up to the heavens above and be brought to knowledge of the gods. Man is not merely a creature native to the earth but is also an observer of all that happens above him in the skies. This spectacle is

not shared with him by any other animal. The organs of sense, which are the messengers and interpreters of the world around us, are placed in the head as though in a watch-tower, and are marvellously adapted each to its proper use. The eyes, as the watchmen, have the highest place, whence they have the widest field of view and can best carry out their task. The ears too are aptly sited on the head, so as to catch the rising sounds of nature. As all odours too rise upwards, the nostrils also are highly placed, and as they play a great part in our enjoyment of food and drink, they are properly set adjacent to the mouth. The organ of taste, which must distinguish between the different kinds of food, is set in that part of the face through which nature has made an entrance for our food and drink. The sense of touch on the contrary is diffused throughout the whole body, so that we may feel any contact or excessive degree of heat or cold. And as in a house the architect removes from the sight and smell of those who live in it those effluents which would inevitably be somewhat offensive, so nature has relegated all such bodily functions to a distance from our senses.

‘Nature is subtle above all things and what other artificer could so cunningly have wrought our senses? She has given our eyes the protection of the most delicate covering membranes, which are at once translucent to give clear sight yet strong enough safely to contain the fluid of the eye. She has made the eyes smooth and mobile, to turn quickly away from anything hurtful and easily to turn their gaze wherever they may wish. The actual organ of vision, called the pupil (*pupula*) or “little doll”, is small enough easily to avoid injury.* Then there are the eyelids, very soft to the touch so as not to harm the sight, exquisitely designed by nature to open or shut quickly, so that nothing can get into the eye. The eyelids are fenced with a kind of palisade of hairs. These serve to prevent anything entering the eyes when they are open, and when they are shut in sleep, and we have no wish to see, they rest intertwined one with the other. Furthermore the eyes are designedly deep-set and protected by prominences on every side. Above them the barrier of the eyebrows prevents sweat running into them from the head and forehead, while the cheeks swell gently to protect them from below, and the nose is placed like a separating wall between them.

‘Our ears, unlike our eyes, are always open, for we need our hearing even in our sleep, from which we can be roused by any sound. The windings of the inner ear prevent anything going into it as it could if the entrance were straight and simple. Nature has even provided that even the tiniest creature which tries to creep in should be caught in sticky wax. The ears project outwards from the head, to shield and protect the organs of hearing and to prevent the sounds slipping past and being lost before they can affect the sense. The entrance to the

ears is hard and gristly, with many involutions, which serve to reflect and amplify the sound, just as in a lyre tortoiseshell or horn is used to give resonance to the strings. Or as sounds are amplified by the echo in narrow winding corridors.

‘The nostrils too, which must always be open, have narrower entrances, to prevent the entrance of anything injurious, and they are always moist to keep out dust and any foreign bodies.

‘The organ of taste is particularly well protected inside the mouth, ready for use and at the same time safely guarded.

‘Every human sense far surpasses the senses of the beasts. Human vision is superior in all those matters in which the eye is the judge, such as painting, sculpture and engraving, and we have a much keener eye for movement and gesture. Our eyes too can judge of the charm and harmony and, so to speak, of the propriety of different shapes and colours. More important still, they can distinguish between good and bad. They can tell when somebody is pleased or angry, glad or sorry, brave or cowardly, bold or timid. In our sense of hearing too we find a marvellous power of discrimination in the perception of differences between the various notes of the voice, or of wind and string instruments, an appreciation of pitch and tone, and also of the many different qualities of voice, sonorous or dull, smooth or rough, low or shrill, firm or flexible. Only the human ear can evaluate such differences. We also have great powers of discrimination in our senses of smell, taste and touch. To please and captivate these senses many arts have been invented, perhaps more than one could wish, for we all see to what lengths we have gone in the blending of perfumes, the seasoning of food and the luxuries of dress.

‘As for the man who does not see that the mind and soul of man, with their qualities of reason, judgement and foresight, have been perfected by divine Providence... well, he seems to me to be lacking in these qualities himself. I wish I were endowed with your eloquence, Cotta, when it comes to arguing on this subject. I wonder how you would express it? Would you cite our intelligence and our understanding of the laws of cause and effect? The way in which we are able to determine what consequences may be drawn from given premises and to put this in logical terms? The way in which we can define particular objects concisely and completely? How we are thus led on to comprehend the nature and power of knowledge, the highest gift of God?

‘But how great too are those powers which you of the Academy would undermine or explain away. I mean the way in which through our senses we can grasp and understand the world around us. By synthesis and analysis we can then devise those arts of life which

serve us for our use and pleasure. Then there is the marvellous and godlike gift of speech. Do not you Academics call it "the mistress of the world"? Through speech we are able to learn things of which we would otherwise be ignorant and to impart what we have learnt to others. Through speech we can encourage, persuade, console the sorrowful, dispel the fears of the terrified, restrain the headstrong, cool anger or lust. It is the power of speech which has bound us together in the bonds of justice, law and citizenship. It has raised us from a life of brutal savagery.

'It is almost incredible to those who have not studied the subject what pains nature has taken to confer on us this gift of speech. First there is a passage from the lungs to the inner part of the mouth, through which the voice is projected in accordance with the orders of the mind. In the mouth is the tongue, surrounded by the teeth. These limit and define the free flow of sound, and so curb and distinguish the tones of the voice, according as the tongue is pressed against the teeth or other parts of the mouth. For this reason the tongue is often compared by philosophers of our persuasion to the plectrum with which we strike the strings of a musical instrument. The teeth are compared to the strings themselves, and the nostrils to the horn which gives resonance to the strings when the instrument is played.

'Above all nature has given us the hand, so apt a tool for crafts of every kind. The suppleness of the joints facilitates the opening and closing of the fingers and makes every movement easy. Through the movements of the fingers the hand is fitted for painting, modelling, carving and for the playing of string- and wind-instruments.

'All this is for our pleasure. But the hand also serves our necessities, in the cultivation of the soil, in the building of houses, in the weaving and sewing of our clothes and in the working of bronze and iron.

'So we see how the evidence of our senses leads to the inventions of the mind which are then realized by the hand of the craftsman, so as to satisfy all our needs and keep us safely housed and clothed, to give us cities, walls, homes and temples. By our human skills of hand we find ourselves food in plenty and variety. The land offers many fruits to the searching hand, which can be either eaten on the spot or preserved to be eaten later. We feed also on the creatures of the land and sea and air, which we catch or rear for the purpose. We can break in and ride four-footed animals and make their speed and strength our own. On some we place yokes and others we use as beasts of burden. For our own purposes we exploit the keen senses of the elephant and the sagacity of the dog. From the depths of the earth we extract iron, so necessary for the tilling of the soil. We search out deeply buried veins of copper, silver and gold, for both use and ornament. We cut up trees and make use of all sorts of wild and cultivated plants, to make

fires to warm our bodies and to cook our food, and also for building, so that we may have a roof over our heads to keep out the heat and cold. We use these materials also to build ships, which sail in all directions to bring us all the needs of life. We alone can tame and control the most violent forces of nature, the sea and the winds, through our knowledge of navigation, and so we enjoy the benefit of all the riches of the sea. We have also taken possession of all the fruits of the earth. Ours to enjoy are the mountains and the plains. Ours are the rivers and lakes. We sow corn and plant trees. We fertilize the soil by irrigation. We dam the rivers, to guide them where we will. One may say that we seek with our human hands to create a second nature in the natural world.

‘Even the heavens are open to the mind of Man. Man alone of all the animals has traced the pathways of the rising and the setting of the stars. Man has measured out the days and months and years. Man alone has understood and can predict the eclipses of the sun and moon for all future time, when they will occur, and whether they will be partial or total. When the mind contemplates these phenomena, it learns also knowledge of the gods. So religion is born, and with it goodness and all the virtues which make up the good life, a life which reflects the divine life. We need to be inferior to the gods in nothing except our mortality, which need in no way hinder us from living well. In explaining these things, I think that I have shown clearly enough how much superior is human nature to that of all the other animals. From which we must infer that such a shape and arrangement of our limbs and such a power of intelligence cannot have been the work of chance alone.

‘In conclusion I must show that everything in the world which we enjoy was made and ordered for our sake. The universe itself was made for both gods and men, and all that is in it was devised and ordered for the use of Man. The universe is as it were the common home of gods and men, a city which they share. They alone have the power of reason and live by justice and by law. Just as we must recognize that Athens and Sparta were founded for the Athenians and Spartans, and that everything in those cities may rightly be said to belong to those two peoples, so everything in the universe may be said to belong to the gods and to mankind. The courses of the sun and moon and stars are an essential part of the fabric of the universe, but they also present a marvellous spectacle to Man. This is a sight of which we can never tire, beautiful beyond words, and a supreme example both of wisdom and of art. Man alone has measured out the courses of the stars and knows their times and their seasons, their changes and variety. If Man alone knows this, we must infer that it was for Man’s sake that they were made. The earth too, mother of all

manner of fruits and crops which she bears in generous profusion – do you think she bears them for man or for the animals? What of the vine and the olive? Their rich and joyous fruits are nothing to the animals. Animals have no idea of crops and cultivation or of the timely picking and gathering of fruits, or of their preservation and storage. All such things are the use and care of Man alone.

‘Would you not say that flutes and lyres are made for those who can use them? Then similarly you must admit that all these things which I have mentioned have been created only for those who can benefit from them. If animals sometimes snatch or steal some of them, we still would not say that they were created for their benefit. Men do not plant grain for the benefit of mice and ants, but for their wives and children and their kinsfolk. Animals, as I have said, may enjoy them furtively and by stealth, but it is the human owner who enjoys them openly and freely. We must therefore admit that all the plenty of these things has been provided for the use of Man. All this richness and variety of the fruits of the earth, pleasant not only to the taste but also to the smell and sight – can we doubt that it is the gift of nature to mankind alone? So far from the fruits of the earth being provided for the animals’ sake, we see that the animals themselves have been created for the service of Man. What purpose do sheep serve, except from their fleeces to provide the stuff of woven garments for mankind? If they were not reared and cared for by us, they could not produce anything or even nourish and sustain themselves. Consider too the dog, how faithful he is on watch, how he loves and adores his master, how he hates the stranger, how wonderfully keen is his sense of smell in tracking and his speed in hunting. This can only mean that he was created for the service of Man. Look at the ox. His back is not shaped to carry a burden, but his neck is made for the yoke. Look at the length and breadth of his shoulders to draw the plough. The poets tell us that the men of the golden age never did any harm to oxen, by whom the earth was broken up and the furrows ploughed.

Then suddenly a race of iron arose
Who dared the first to forge the deadly sword
And eat the oxen whom their hands had tamed.*

So great had been thought to be the services rendered by the ox that it was thought to be a crime to eat its flesh.

‘It would be tedious to enumerate the services of mules and asses, which were clearly intended for the use of Man. Of what use is the pig, except to be eaten? Indeed Chrysippus says that the life in a pig is merely the salt which prevents it going bad. Nature has also produced no animal more fertile than the pig, which is so suitable for human

food. Consider too the variety and succulence of all the birds and fishes. They give us so much pleasure that sometimes it almost seems that this Providence in which we Stoics believe is herself an Epicurean! But these creatures can only be caught by the wit and cunning of Man. We believe too that some of the birds – birds of flight and birds of utterance, as the augurs call them – were created to give us omens of things to come. We catch the bigger and more savage beasts by hunting, both to obtain food and to exercise ourselves in a sort of imitation of military training; and also to train beasts we have caught and tame them to our service, as we do with elephants. From their bodies too we derive many remedies for illnesses and wounds, as we do also from certain roots and herbs, the usefulness of which we have come to know from use and experiments over long periods of time. Let your mind's eye wander over all the earth and sea and survey the vast expanses of the fertile plains, the closely wooded mountains, the pasture lands and the marvellous swift-flowing currents of the sea. Think too of the many useful things which lie hidden not on the surface of the earth but in darkness underground. These too are for the use of Man and it is only Man who can discover them.

‘The gift of prophecy above all seems to me the strongest proof that the divine Providence concerns itself with the welfare of Man, although I know both of you are likely to be quick to attack me on this point, Cotta because Carneades was always eager to criticize the Stoics and Velleius because the prediction of future events is a favourite target for the wit of Epicurus. The gift of prophecy has manifested itself in many places and at many times, both in private and in public affairs. Many things have been revealed to seers and foretold by prophets. Many events have been foreshadowed by oracles, soothsayings, dreams and omens. Men have often derived benefit from knowledge of these arts and avoided many dangers. This power or art or natural gift of prophecy has been conferred upon Man alone by the immortal gods. If single examples do not convince you, the connection and harmony of the whole must surely do so. And the providence of the gods does not care merely for the human race in general but also for individuals. So let us gradually break down the general concept of mankind into smaller groups until we arrive at the individual person.

‘If we are to believe, for the reasons which I have given, that the gods have a care for all men everywhere, on every shore and in every country of the earth, however far from our own homeland, then they must care for our neighbours who share with us these lands between the East and West. If they care for all who inhabit this great island which we call “the circle of the earth”, then they must care for those who live in each part of it, in Europe, Asia, Africa. They must care too

for each part of those parts, Rome, Athens, Sparta, Rhodes. They must not only love the citizens of those cities as a whole, but also the particular individuals, such as Curius, Fabricius and Coruncianus in the war against Pyrrhus: Calatinus, Duellius, Metellus and Lutatius in the first Carthaginian War: Maximus, Marcellus and Africanus in the second Carthaginian War. And later Paullus, Gracchus, Cato and, in our fathers' time, Scipio and Laelius. Both Rome and Greece have produced many such heroic characters and we cannot believe that any of them would have been what they were without the help of God. It is this thought that inspired the poets, and especially Homer, to associate particular gods with their chief heroes (such as Ulysses, Diomedes, Agamemnon and Achilles) as companions of their trials and perils. Often the actual appearance of a god, as I have said before, gives witness of their concern for men and nations, as may also be known from the signs which they give of things to come, by omens given sometimes to those who wake, sometimes to those who dream. The gods often give us warnings by portents and auspices, and in many other ways which daily observation has developed into the art of divination. There was never a great man without some breath of the divine. My argument is not to be disproved by saying that it requires us to believe a man to be neglected or hated by the gods if his crops or vineyards are damaged in a storm, or some other such loss befalls him. The gods are concerned only with great matters, they have no interest in trifles. For great men all things always turn out well, if the riches and abundance which flow from goodness have been truly told by our own Stoic teachers and by Socrates, the fountain-head of all philosophy.

‘This then in general is what it seemed to me I ought to say about the nature of the gods. I hope that you, Cotta, if you will listen to me, will plead the same cause, and remember that you are both a public figure and a priest. As an Academician you may take either side of the argument, so I hope that you will plead my cause, and that to this purpose you will use those powers of eloquence, derived from your training as a speaker, which have been fostered in the school of the Academy. To argue against the gods is a sinister and impious habit, whether it springs from conviction or from mere pretence.’

BOOK III

WHEN Balbus had spoken, Cotta smiled at him and said, 'It is rather late for you, Balbus, to advise me what position I should defend, for while you were talking I was already pondering what I should say in reply. I am not so much anxious to refute what you said as to question you on those points which I did not clearly understand. But if we are each to trust his own judgement, I should find it difficult to think as you would have me do.'

'Well, Cotta,' said Velleius at this point, 'you do not know how much I am looking forward to hearing what you have to say. Your attack on Epicurus pleased our friend Balbus. Now I in my turn shall listen with interest to what you have to say against the Stoics, so I hope that you come to this part of our discussion as well briefed as you usually are.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Cotta. 'But I have not got the same quarrel with Lucilius as I had with you.'

'How is that?' asked Velleius.

'Because your hero Epicurus did not seem to me to be serious in his arguments about the gods. He was just afraid to deny their existence, in case he should incur unpopularity or a charge of impiety. When he said that the gods are inactive and impassive, and endowed them with human bodies for which they could have no use – well, it seemed to me that he had his tongue in his cheek and thought he had done enough by conceding the existence of some such happy and immortal beings.

'But you will I am sure have noticed that Balbus had plenty to say about them, and that everything he said fitted coherently together, even if it was not true. So I have it in mind, as I said, not so much to refute his arguments as to question him on some of them which I did not understand. So I leave it to you, Balbus, whether you prefer to answer my questions one by one on the points which I did not quite agree with, or first to hear my criticism as a whole.'

'If you just want some things further explained,' said Balbus, 'I would rather take them as they come. But if you want to put me to the question, not just for explanations, but to refute my argument, then I will do as you like, answer each question at once or all of them at the end.'

'Very well,' said Cotta, 'let us leave it to the argument itself to lead us.'

‘But before we start, let me say a few words about myself. I stand in some awe of your authority, Balbus, and of the plea which you made to me at the end of your discourse that I should remember that I am Cotta and a priest. By this you meant, I take it, that I ought to defend the beliefs which we have inherited from our ancestors about the immortal gods, with all their attendant ceremonies and sacred rituals. And I shall always defend them, as I have defended them in the past. Nobody, be he learned or unlearned, shall ever argue me out of the views which I have received from my forebears about the worship of the gods.

‘When it is a question of religious observance, I follow such religious authorities as Titus Coruncianus, Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, and not Zeno or Cleanthes or Chrysippus. I would rather hear Gaius Laelius, * a philosopher and an augur, speaking about religion in that famous speech of his than listen to any leader of the Stoics.

‘The whole of our Roman religion can be divided into two parts, worship and divination. A third may be added if we include the prophecies which have been derived from signs and portents by the soothsayers and the interpreters of the Sibyl. I have never held any of these aspects of our religion in contempt. I have even persuaded myself that Romulus by his reading of omens and Numa by the institution of religious ceremonies together laid the foundations of the Roman state, which could never have grown to its present power without the favour of the gods.

‘So now you know, Balbus, the views of Cotta the priest. You must now explain to me some of your own views. I believe what our ancestors have taught us, though they give no reasons. But from you, as a philosopher, I have a right to ask for a rational explanation of religious faith.’

‘Well then,’ said Balbus, ‘what is it that you want me to explain?’

‘You divided your argument into four parts,’ said Cotta. ‘You sought to prove that divine beings exist, you tried to explain their nature, how they govern the world, and the care which they have for the affairs of men. This, if I remember rightly, was how you divided up your subject.’

‘Quite so,’ said Balbus, ‘but I am still waiting for your question.’

‘First things first,’ said Cotta, ‘and I would put first that belief on which all are agreed, except the blasphemers, and which certainly can never be erased from my own mind, the belief in the existence of the gods. I am persuaded of this belief by its traditional authority: but you have given me no reasons why I should believe it.’

‘But if you are already persuaded of its truth,’ said Balbus, ‘why do

you want me to confirm it?’

‘Because,’ said Cotta, ‘I want to approach this argument as though I had never heard of the existence of divine beings or given any thought to the matter. Accept me as a new and ignorant pupil, and tell me what I want to know.’

‘Very well,’ said Balbus, ‘then once again, what is your question?’

‘My question is this,’ answered Cotta. ‘Why did you argue at such length about something which you said needed no argument, because it was obvious and generally agreed?’

‘Because I have often noticed that you also, Cotta, when you speak in the law-courts, bring as many arguments as you can to bear upon the judge, whenever your brief provides the opportunity. The philosophers do the same: and so did I, as best I could. To question this is similar to asking me why I look at you with two eyes when I could see you well enough with one.’

‘You will see how similar it is,’ said Cotta. ‘In the first place, it is not my custom to argue in the law-courts about obvious matters of fact on which all parties are agreed. The obvious is only obscured by superfluous arguments. Even if I did so argue in the courts, I would not do so in an intricate discussion of this kind. There would be no sense in looking at me with one eye only, when you have the sight of two, and Nature, whom you credit with such wisdom, has provided you with a double passage for the light from eyes to brain. In fact you were doubtful whether the proposition was as obvious as you would have wished, and so you were anxious to bolster the existence of the gods by many arguments. For me one was enough, that this was the traditional belief of our ancestors. But you despise authority and appeal to reason. So let me meet you on your own ground. You deploy all these arguments to prove that divine beings exist. But by these very arguments you cast doubt on something which to my mind is not doubtful at all.

‘I think I can remember all your arguments in the order in which you put them forward. Your first argument was that when we look up at the heavens we immediately understand that there must be some divinity which governs them, and you quoted the line:

Lift up your eyes to that bright firmament,
Which men call Jupiter

as though any of us would really give the name of Jupiter to the firmament rather than to Jupiter of the Capitol. Or as if it were obvious and generally agreed that things were divine which Velleius and many others would not even consider to have any life at all!* You seemed to give much weight to the argument that there was a general

belief in the existence of the gods which grew stronger every day. But are you content that such matters should be decided by the judgement of fools, you, a Stoic, a member of a sect which regards all folly as a kind of mental disorder!

‘Then you say the gods actually appear to men,[†] and you gave the examples of the experiences of Postumius at Lake Regillus and of Vatinius on the Via Salaria, and told us some tale or other about the Locrians at the battle of Sagra. Then too you invoked Castor and Pollux, who were mortal men with mortal parents and whom Homer (who lived not long after them) says died and were buried in Sparta. You affirm that these two appeared to Vatinius, riding alone on white nags with no retainers, and announced a Roman victory not to Marcus Cato, who was the chief Senator, but to this rustic fellow Vatinius! And this mark in the rock like a hoof print, which can still be seen on the shore of Lake Regillus – do you really believe that this was made by Castor’s horse? Is it not better to believe that the spirits of famous men such as Castor and Pollux are eternal and divine rather than that their bodies which have been burnt on the funeral pyre could take part in a cavalry engagement? If you do maintain such a thing to be possible, you should tell us how, not fob us off with old wives’ tales.’

‘Old wives’ tales?’ said Balbus. ‘Did not Aulus Postumius dedicate a temple to Castor and Pollux in the Forum? Are you not aware that Vatinius was mentioned in a resolution of the senate? As for Sagra, it is a household word among the Greeks. When they wish to assert something strongly, they say it is “as sure as Sagra”. Is all this evidence nothing to you?’

‘You palm me off with hearsay, Balbus,’ answered Cotta, ‘when what I want from you is reasoned argument.’

[A part of Cotta’s argument is missing here]

‘Then there is the question of the future, which nobody can escape. Often however it is no advantage to know beforehand what is going to happen. It is a miserable thing to be tortured by one’s own impotence and to forfeit even our last common consolation of hope. Especially when you teach that all is governed by a fate which has been determined from all eternity. So what use is it, what scope for discretion does it give, to know the future, if it cannot be altered?

‘And what was the origin of your art of divination? Who discovered the significance of a cleft in an animal’s liver or interpreted the raven’s cry? Or the way the lots fall? Not that I do not believe in these things. I do not despise an augur such as Attus Navius, whom you mentioned.* But how omens came to be understood is something I must learn from the philosophers, especially as the predictions of the

soothsayers are often falsified by the event. But, you argue, doctors too are often wrong.[†] There is however to my mind no comparison between medicine, which applies reasoning which I can understand, and the power of divination, the origin of which is a mystery to me. You argue too that the gods were appeased by the sacrifice of the lives of the Decii.[‡] Were they then so unjust that they could not be reconciled with the Romans except through the deaths of such brave men? In fact this was just a military device – a “stratagem” as the Greeks say – devised by leaders who thought only of their country and not of their own lives. They guessed that their men would follow a general who set spurs to his horse and rode alone against the enemy. As to the voice of a faun,^{*} I have never heard one. But if you say you have, I will take your word for it, though I have no idea what manner of being a faun may be.

‘So nothing that I have heard from you so far, Balbus, would convince me that the gods exist. I myself believe in their existence, but the Stoics add no reason to my faith.

‘Cleanthes, as you said, thinks that ideas of the gods are formed in our minds in four ways. The first, on which I have already had my say, arises from premonitions of future events. The second from the terror of storms and other natural disturbances. The third from the usefulness and abundance of the commodities which we enjoy. The fourth from the order of the stars and the harmony of the heavens. I have already dealt with foreknowledge. As to natural disturbances by land and sea, one cannot deny that when they occur they strike terror into many people, who attribute them to the power of the gods. But the question whether the gods exist or not is not the same as the question whether a number of people believe in their existence.

‘As for the two other arguments adduced by Cleanthes, the one about the number of blessings which we enjoy and the other about the order of the seasons and the harmony of the heavens – these I shall deal with when I come to speak about the divine Providence. You said a great deal about this, Balbus. I shall also defer for the moment the saying which you attribute to Chrysippus that as nature shows phenomena which are beyond the capacity of men, there must be in the universe a power greater than Man. You compared the artificial beauty of a house with the natural beauty of the world, and spoke of the harmony and common purpose of the whole of nature, quoting some terse and subtle arguments of Zeno on this subject. These arguments too I shall deal with when I speak about Providence, and at the same time I shall reply to all that you said about physics and the vital fire and about the principle of heat from which you said that everything was generated. I shall deal in the same context with all that you said^{*} to the effect that the whole universe, the sun and moon

and stars, are sentient and conscious beings. But I must still go on asking you this one question, "By what rational arguments do you persuade yourself that gods exist at all?" '

'Well, well,' said Balbus, 'I was under the impression I had given you my reasons. But you have your own method of disposing of them. Whenever you seem to be going to put a question and I prepare myself to answer it, you suddenly change the subject before I have a chance to reply. So the most important topics – such as prophecy and predestination – are passed over in silence. Why? Presumably because these are questions on which those of my persuasion have much to say, while those of yours have little. But these questions are different from the one before us at present. So please do not mix things up, and let us first deal with the point which is at issue now.'

'By all means,' said Cotta, 'and as it was you who divided the whole subject into four parts, and we have dealt with the first, let us now consider the second. In this it seemed to me that your argument was such that in trying to define the nature of the gods, you only succeeded in showing that they do not exist at all. You pointed out how difficult it is for us to think otherwise than through visual images. Then you said that as there could be nothing more excellent than God, the universe itself must be God, as there was nothing more excellent than the whole scheme of things. If we could only think of it as a conscious being, and see this truth with the eyes of the mind as we see other things with the eyes of the body! But when you say that there is nothing more perfect than the universe as a whole, what do you mean by "perfect"? If you mean "beautiful", I agree. If you mean "fitted to our needs", I agree again. But if you mean that there is nothing wiser than the universe, then I do not agree at all. Not because I find it difficult to think otherwise than in visual images, but because the more I do so the less I understand what you are talking about.'

'There is nothing in nature, you say, superior to the universe itself. Well, I say there is nothing on earth superior to the city of Rome. Must I therefore imagine that the city of Rome thinks and reasons like an intelligent being? But since this is not so, do you consider that an ant, for example, is to be preferred to this beautiful city of ours? The city is not a conscious being, but the ant is not only conscious, but has powers of reason, thought and memory. So we have to decide, Balbus, just how much we can concede to you. You cannot merely assume whatever you like. Now in fact that pithy old syllogism of Zeno, which you are so fond of, opens up the whole subject. Zeno argued thus: "Any being which reasons is superior to any being which does not. But there is nothing superior to the universe as a whole. Therefore the universe is a reasoning being." If you accept this argument, then you

will have a universe which is proficient in the art of reading books. Because if you follow in Zeno's footsteps, you will have to develop his argument as follows: "A being which can read is superior to a being which cannot. But nothing is superior to the universe as a whole. Therefore the universe as a whole can read." Then you will have to go on to say that the universe is a scholar, a mathematician, a musician, a master of all the arts and sciences. So you will end up by turning the universe itself into a philosopher!

'You have said time and again that nothing is created outside the natural universe and that there is no power in nature to create anything other than itself. Do you then now ask us to believe that the natural universe is not only a conscious and rational being but also a player on the lute and harp, since it has created out of itself men who are masters of these arts?

'So we see that the father of the Stoics gives us no real reasons for assuming that the universe is a rational being or even a conscious being. Therefore the universe is not God. But it is true that there is nothing superior to it. There is nothing more beautiful, nothing more beneficent, more splendid to look upon or more constant in its movements. But if the universe is not divine, neither are the stars, the whole infinite number of which you enrolled among the gods, in your admiration of their constant and eternal movement through the heavens. You are right to wonder at them. We must all admire and marvel at their regularity. But it does not follow, Balbus, that because the stars are sure and constant in their courses that they are not natural phenomena but gods.

'What for instance could be more regular than the alternating flow of the water in the straits of Chalcis? Or than that in the Sicilian straits? Or than the ocean currents,

Where the greedy sea severs Europe from Africa?

Then there are the tidal seas of Spain and Britain. Must we invoke a god to explain their constant ebb and flow? Are we to find a divinity in every regular movement and in everything which happens in a constant order? If so, we shall have to say that tertian and quartan agues are divine, because their course and recurrence is absolutely uniform. No: we must seek an intelligible cause for all these phenomena. The moment you fail to find one, you run off to a god like a suppliant to an altar.

'You were much impressed by the insight of Chrysippus. I grant him a shrewd and hard intelligence. Shrewd enough I mean to shift quickly from one position to another and tough from much hard thinking as a hand is calloused from hard labour.* "If anything happens," he says,

“which could not be brought about by man, it must be brought about by some power superior to man. Man could not bring about the various phenomena which we see in nature. Therefore they must be brought about by a power superior to man. But what is superior to man but God? Therefore these phenomena are the works of God.” The whole of this argument displays the same fallacy which we saw in the works of Zeno. There is no definition of what is meant by “superior”, and no distinction is made between nature and reason. “If there are no gods,” says he, “there will be nothing in the whole of nature superior to man,” and he argues that “for anybody to imagine that there is nothing superior to man is the very height of arrogance”. Certainly it would be an arrogant man who rated himself higher than the whole world. But it is not arrogance, it is merely common-sense, to recognize that a man has consciousness and intelligence and that Orion and the Dog Star do not. “If we see a beautiful house,” he says, “we know that it was built for men and not for mice, and so we must recognize the universe as the home of the gods.” I would agree, if only the universe were a house and not, as I shall show, a work of nature.[†]

‘You reminded us that Xenophon tells how Socrates once asked where we got our own souls from, if the universe itself is soulless. One could as well ask where we get our language from, and our mathematics, and our music. Do you imagine that the sun opens up a conversation with the moon, when they come close together, or that the whole world sings in harmony, as Pythagoras thought? No, Balbus, there is a natural explanation for all these things. But this is not to be found in a nature “moving like a craftsman” (such as Zeno describes and I shall later consider): but in a nature which stirs up and keeps in motion all things by its own changing impulses. For this reason I was pleased with what you said about the harmony and interrelation of nature, which you described as working together in a constant harmony. But I do not subscribe to your opinion that this could not happen unless the whole of nature was infused with one divine spirit. Nature persists and coheres by its own power without any help from gods. There is indeed inherent in it a kind of harmony or “sympathy” as the Greeks call it. But the greater it is in its own right, the less need it be regarded as the work of some divine power.

‘And how do you dispose of the arguments of Carneades? If no body is immortal, there is no such thing as an eternal body. There is in fact no immortal body, no individual atom which cannot be split and pulled apart. Every living thing is therefore in its nature vulnerable. There is none which can escape external influences. All must endure the rigour of necessity: and all must feel and suffer. But if every living thing must suffer, none can be immortal. If every living thing can be cut up and divided, then none is indivisible and none eternal. Every

living thing must suffer the effects of external forces and so is mortal and destructible and divisible. If all wax were changeable, there would be nothing made of wax which could not be changed. If silver and bronze were changeable by nature, then there is nothing made of silver or bronze which cannot be changed. Similarly if the elements of which everything is composed are subject to change, then there is no body which is not so subject. If however there were any immortal body, it would not be subject to change. But in your view the elements of everything are subject to change, and therefore every body is so subject. So we see that no body is immortal. For an immortal body would not be liable to change.

‘All bodies consist of water, air, fire or earth, or a mixture of these or of some of them. But none of these elements is indestructible.

‘Everything made of earth can be divided and liquids are so yielding that they offer little resistance to pressure and impact. Fire and air yield very easily to every force and their substance is yielding and easily dispersed. Furthermore all these things perish when they are changed into another form, as happens when earth is changed into water, water into air, air into aether, and when the process is reversed. So if the elements perish, of which all living things are made, no living thing can be immortal.

‘Even if we waive these arguments, it is still impossible to point to any living creature which was never born and which will never die. Every living creature has sense-experience of some kind. It feels heat and cold, tastes sweet and bitter. And every sense which can feel pleasure may also feel pain. The senses of pleasure and of pain go together. But any creature which experiences pain is experiencing its own destruction. So you must admit that every living thing is mortal. A being which feels neither pleasure nor pain cannot be alive at all. Every living creature must feel pleasure and pain and for this reason it cannot be immortal or eternal. There is also no living creature which does not have its own desires and aversions. It desires what is conformable to its nature and rejects what is contrary to it. So every living creature seeks after some things and avoids others. It avoids the things contrary to its nature, because such things have the power to destroy it. Thus every living creature must sometime perish.

‘There are countless other cogent arguments to prove that every conscious being must perish in the end. Our very sensations themselves – cold, heat, pleasure, pain – all these can destroy us when intensified to an extreme. But there is nothing living without some form of sensation. So nothing which lives can live for ever.

‘The nature of a living being is either simple, and made of a single element, such as earth, fire, air or water – a mode of being which is

quite incomprehensible to us – or else it is a compound of several elements, each of which has its own place towards which it tends in accordance with the laws of nature – one below, another above, another in the middle. Such elements may cohere for a time, but not for ever. Each element will in the end find its own level. So no living creature is eternal.

‘The philosophers of your school, Balbus, like to reduce everything to the vital principle of fire. In this, as I understand it, they follow Heraclitus,* although not everyone interprets him in the same way. But let us leave him out of it, as he was deliberately obscure,† and just say that your school hold that fire is the ultimate power behind all things. You instance the way in which living creatures perish when deprived of warmth and point out that throughout nature it is warmth which gives life and vigour. But I am not clear about this. Why should bodies be thought to perish because the warmth is gone, and not because the air or moisture is gone? Especially as bodies can in fact be destroyed by too much heat. So that in this respect heat seems to be on a par with air and water.

‘Let us see what follows. You would have it, I think, that fire is the only living thing in the whole natural world. But why fire rather than air, which is the breath of life?‡ So why do you assume, as if it were common ground, that the vital principle is simply fire? It seems more likely that it is in fact a mixture of fire and air. But if fire of itself and by itself makes the living creature, with no admixture of any other element, then fire, as it exists in our bodies, must be the source of our sensations and so cannot be itself insensate. So we come back to the same point. Whatever has feeling must feel pleasure and pain. And whatever knows pain must in the end know death. So you cannot show that even this vital fire itself is eternal. And does not your school of thought like to say that every fire needs nourishment? That it cannot last unless it is fed? And that the sun, moon and stars are fed by moisture, some by fresh water and some by salt? Cleanthes gives this as the reason why the sun retraces its path, and does not go further in its summer and its winter course, so as not to become too far distant from that on which it feeds. More of this anon: for the present I merely argue that whatever can die is not eternal by nature, and fire can die if it is not fed. So fire is not eternal by nature.

‘And what sort of god can we imagine who is not endowed with some moral qualities? Well then, are we to attribute wisdom to God? Wisdom is the knowledge of good and evil and of the things which are neither good nor evil. But a being who is not and cannot be touched by anything of evil has no need to choose between good and bad. What then of reason and intelligence? We use these faculties so as to proceed from the known to the unknown. But nothing can be

unknown to God. Then there is justice, which renders to each his due – what has this to do with the gods? Justice, in your philosophy, is a product of human social communities. Then there is temperance, which consists in abstention from physical pleasures. If there is temperance in heaven, there must be bodily pleasures also. What about courage? Is God courageous in pain, in toil, in danger? God knows nothing of such things. But how can we conceive a god who does not reason and has no moral qualities?

‘Upon my word, I cannot feel contempt for the ignorance of the uneducated masses, when I consider the sort of rubbish that is talked by Stoic philosophers. We all know the popular beliefs. The Syrians worship a Fish-God.* The Egyptians have deified almost the whole animal kingdom. Even in Greece a number of human beings have been translated into gods. The people of Alabanda worship Alabandus, the islanders of Tenedos worship Tenes. All Greece worships Leucothea, who was Ino, and her son Palaemon, not to mention Hercules, Aesculapius and Castor and Pollux. We Romans too worship Romulus and various other human personages, whom we seem to regard as recently naturalized citizens of the kingdom of heaven!

‘These are the superstitions of the ignorant. But are you philosophers any better? I leave on one side your more notorious opinions, and concentrate on your assertion that the universe itself is God. I suppose this is

That bright firmament,
Which men call Jupiter.

But why then add a number of other gods? And what a crowd of them! At least they seem to me a goodly multitude! You count all the stars as gods, either giving them the names of animals, such as the Goat, the Scorpion, the Bull, the Lion, or the names of inanimate things, such as the Argo, the Altar and the Crown. But even if we accept these, there are others which we not only cannot accept but which we cannot even understand. When we call corn “Ceres” or the vine “Bacchus” we are using a familiar figure of speech. But do you think that there is really anybody so mad as to believe that the food which he eats is a god? As for the human beings who are said to have become gods, can you give me some rational explanation of how this could happen in the past but not in the present? If so, I shall be only too glad to hear it. But in default of such an explanation, I do not see how Hercules, “whose body was consumed by fire on Mount Oeta”, passed from his funeral-pyre as Accius tells us, “to the eternal home of his father”, when Homer tells us that Ulysses met him in the underworld with the rest of the dead.*

‘Indeed I would like to know which Hercules we are to worship. Those who study obscure and esoteric books tell us there were a number of persons called Hercules. The most ancient was the son of the original Jupiter. I say “original”, because we find several different Jupiters in the ancient writings of the Greeks. The Hercules whom we are told had a contest with Apollo about a tripod was the son of this Jupiter and Lysithoe. Then there is the Egyptian Hercules, who was said to be the son of the Nile and to have written the so-called Phrygian Books. A third Hercules comes from the Digiti of Mount Ida, who offer sacrifices at his tomb. A fourth was the son of Jupiter and Asteria, the sister of Latona, and is chiefly worshipped by the Tyrians, who believe that Carthago was his daughter. A fifth is the Indian Hercules called Belus. A sixth is our friend the son of Jupiter and Alcmena, but of the third Jupiter, since, as I shall explain, we have traditions of several different Jupiters as well.

‘Since the course of the argument has led me to this point, I may assure you that I have learnt more about the worship of the immortal gods, in accordance with priestly law and the traditions of our ancestors, from the poor little sacrificial bowls bequeathed to us by Numa, of which Laelius speaks in that dear little “golden speech” of his, than from all the arguments of the Stoics.* For instance, if I become your disciple, what am I to reply to the man who asks me “If gods exist, are nymphs goddesses? If they are, are Pans and Satyrs also gods?” Surely not. Then neither are nymphs. Yet they have public temples dedicated and devoted to them. So perhaps other beings who have temples dedicated to them may also not be gods. You recognize Jupiter and Neptune as gods. Then their brother Orcus must also be a god and the rivers which are said to flow through the underworld, Acheron, Cocytus, Pyriphlegethon – not to mention such characters as Charon and Cerberus. This would be absurd? Then Orcus cannot be a god. Then what about his brothers?

‘Carneades made use of this line of argument, not to deny that gods exist, which would ill become a philosopher, but to show that the Stoics have no real explanation of them. So he pressed the argument further. “If these brothers are gods,” he said, “then what about their father Saturn? Must he not also be a god? He is indeed widely worshipped in western countries. But if he is a god, his father Caelus (the sky) must be one too. If that is so, then the parents of this Sky-God, Aether and Day, must also be held to be gods. Also their brothers and sisters, who are listed in the old genealogies, Love, Fraud, Fear, Toil, Envy, Destiny, Old Age, Death, Darkness, Misery, Lamentation, Grace, Deceit, Perseverance, the Fates, the Daughters of Hesperus, Dreams – all of whom are said to have been born of Darkness and Night. So either you must accept these monsters or deny the divinity

of Jupiter and Neptune.”

‘Are you going to accept Apollo, Vulcan, Mercury and the rest of them as gods but be doubtful about Hercules, Aesculapius, Liber, and Castor and Pollux? The latter enjoy as wide a worship as the former. In some places much more worship. Are we then to recognize as gods these persons who were born of mortal mothers? What about Aristaeus, who is said to have been the first to discover the vine, a son of Apollo? What about Theseus, a son of Neptune, and the others who had gods for fathers? Are they to have their place among the gods? And what about all those whose mothers were goddesses? Surely they have a still better claim. As in civil law the child of a free woman is a free man, so in natural law the child of a goddess must be a god. And so the islanders of Astypalaea devoutly worship Achilles as the son of Thetis. But if Achilles is a god, then Orpheus and Rhesus must be gods, as their mother was a Muse – unless of course marriages of mortals with sea-goddesses are to take precedence of those with land-goddesses! But if Orpheus and Rhesus are not gods, because no one worships them, how can the others be gods either? Is it not truer to say that honours are paid to the human virtues of these heroes rather than to their immortality? Indeed this seemed to be your own opinion. But if you recognize Latona, say, as a goddess, must you not do as much for Hecate, whose mother was Asteria, a sister of Latona? Is she not too a goddess? We have seen altars and shrines set up to her in Greece. But if she is a goddess, what about the Eumenides? They must be goddesses too – and they have a shrine at Athens and at Rome too, I believe, in the grove which is named after them* – no doubt as observers of human conduct and the avengers of crime and evil-doing. But if we have gods of this sort, who are involved in human affairs, then do we also have to recognize a goddess of Birth, whom we are accustomed to honour when we pass in procession around the shrines in the sacred enclosure at Ardea,[†] and who takes her name *Natio* from “*nasci*” (to be born) because she protects women in childbirth? If she is a goddess, all those personifications whom you enumerated must also be divine, Honour, Faith, Reason, Concord, yes, even Hope and Wealth and every idea one can imagine. If such a belief is ridiculous, then so is the assumption from which it is derived.

‘So what do you say? If the true gods are those whom we worship by tradition, then why not include Isis and Osiris in their number? If we do this, why repudiate the gods of other races? Then we shall be making gods of oxen, horses, ibises, falcons, asps, crocodiles, fishes, dogs, wolves, cats and all manner of beasts. But if we reject them, we must also reject their parentage. And then what? If Ino is to be called a goddess, under the name of Leucothea among the Greeks and Matuta among the Romans, because she is the daughter of Cadmus,

then must not Circe and Pasiphae and Aeetes, who were the children of Perseis, the daughter of Ocean, by the Sun-God, be also accepted as divine? Circe certainly is worshipped religiously by our colonists at Circei. If Circe is a goddess then what about Medea? Her grandparents were Sun and Ocean, her parents Aeetes and Idyia. What about her brother Absyrtus, whom Pacuvius calls Aegialeus, although the other name is commoner in the ancient authors? If these are not gods, I do not know what Ino is to do, for her claims derive from the same source. Is Amphiarus then to be a god, and Trophonius? Our own Inspectors of Taxes denied that certain sacred lands in Boeotia were exempt in law from tax assessment on the grounds that no one could be a god who had formerly been a mortal. But if such persons can be gods, then Erechtheus must certainly be one, whose priest and temple we saw at Athens. And if we accept him as a god, can we have any reason to doubt the divinity of Codrus or other heroes who died fighting for the freedom of their country? If you find all this implausible, then you cannot properly accept the earlier precedents from which these cases follow.

‘We may more reasonably assume that in many countries the memory of brave men has been celebrated with divine honours, to promote the manly virtues and to make men more willing to face danger bravely in the service of the state. This is the real reason why at Athens Erechtheus and his daughters are numbered among the gods. In the same way there is the Leonatic shrine* at Athens called the Leocorion. The people of Alabanda pay more divine worship to Alabandus the founder of their city than to any of the greater gods. This gave occasion for one of the many witticisms of Stratoniceus. When somebody he disliked kept insisting that Alabandus was a god but Hercules was not, “Very well,” said he, “I will risk the anger of Alabandus and you can risk that of Hercules.”

‘As for the arguments which you draw from the sun and stars, do you not see, Balbus, how far the inferences from them would extend? You say that the Sun is a god and the Moon a goddess, the former being identified by the Greeks with Apollo and the latter with Diana. But if the Moon is a goddess, the morning star and the other planets will also be gods and the fixed stars as well. And why should not the phenomenon of the rainbow be recognized as divine? It is beautiful enough and from its marvellous appearance is called the “Child of Wonder”. If however its nature is divine, what will you say about the clouds? The rainbow itself after all is composed of clouds coloured in a certain way and one of these clouds is said to have given birth to the centaurs. If you enrol the clouds among the gods, you will have to enrol the seasons also, which are venerated in certain of our Roman rites. Then the rain, the storm-clouds, the squalls, the whirlwinds will

all have to be reckoned as gods. Our admirals, when they put to sea, traditionally offer a sacrifice to the waves. Again if the name of Ceres is derived from her bearing fruit, as you said, the earth is herself a goddess, as she is believed to be, being the same as the goddess Tellus. If the earth is divine, then so is the sea, which you identified with Neptune, and also the springs and rivers. Maso on his victorious return from Corsica dedicated a shrine to the Fountain and in the prayers of the soothsayers we find the names of Tiber, Spino, Almo, Nodinus and other neighbouring rivers. So either all this god-making will ramify to infinity or else we must reject it altogether and have nothing to do with such an illimitable tissue of superstitions.

‘We cannot swallow any of this. We must also oppose those who say that men whom we all deeply venerate and honour are deified not in fact but in our hearts....

[There is a break in the argument here, which may be due to a misplacement or lacuna in the text]

‘In the first place, our so-called theologians recognize three separate Jupiters. The first and second were born in Arcadia. One was the son of Aether, who is also said to be the parent of Proserpine and Liber. The other was the child of Caelus and is also said to have been the father of Minerva, the patron goddess and originator of war. The third Jupiter was born in Crete, the son of Saturn, and his tomb is shown to visitors to that island.

‘The sons of Jupiter too were variously named among the Greeks. First there were three, called the Kings at Athens, who were born to the most ancient King Jupiter by Proserpine, and were called Tritopatreus, Eubuleus and Dionysus. The second pair, born to the third Jupiter by Leda, were Castor and Pollux. A third group are named by some Alco, Melampus and Tmolus, and are the sons of Atreus, the son of Pelops.

‘The first set of four Muses, Thelxinoe, Aoede, Arche and Melete, were daughters of the second Jupiter. The second set were the nine Muses born of the third Jupiter and Mnemosyne. Not to mention a third set born of Pierus and Antiope, called by the poets the Pierides or Pieriae. They have the same names and number as the set I have just mentioned.

‘You said that the name of the Sun-God derived from his solitary and unique nature. But how many sun-gods are we offered by the theologians? One was a son of Jupiter and grandson of Aether. Another was the son of Hyperion. Another was the son of Vulcan, the son of Nilus, and the Egyptians regard Heliopolis as being his own city. A fourth is said to have been borne by Acanthe in Rhodes in the

heroic age, the father of Ialysus, Camirus, Lindus and Rhodus. The fifth is the one who is said to have begotten Aeetes and Circe in Colchi.

‘In the same way there are several Vulcans. The first is a son of the Sky-God and was said to be the father by Minerva of the Apollo whom the old historians claimed to be the protector of Athens. The second was a son of Nilus, whom the Egyptians call Phthah and claim as the guardian of Egypt. The third is a son of the third Jupiter and Juno, who tradition says was the master of the smithy of Lemnos. The fourth was a son of Memalius and was lord of the volcanic islands around Sicily.*

‘Then again there was one Mercury who was the child of the Sky-God and whose mother was the goddess of Day. This is the Mercury who is represented as sexually excited by the beauty of Proserpina. Another Mercury is the son of Valens and Phoronis, who lives below the earth and is also known as Trophonius. A third Mercury was the son of the third Jupiter and of Maia and was said to be the father of Pan by Penelope. A fourth Mercury was the son of the Nile, whose name may not be spoken by the Egyptians. A fifth is worshipped at Pheneus. This is the Mercury who is said to have slain Argus and for this reason to have fled to Egypt and given laws and the art of writing to the Egyptians. This is the Mercury whom the Egyptians call Thoth, and they give this name in their calendar to the first month of the year.

‘Then there is one Aesculapius who is the son of Apollo and is worshipped in Arcadia. This was the Aesculapius who invented the surgeon’s probe and is said to have been the first to bandage wounds. Another Aesculapius was the brother of the second Mercury and is said to have been struck by lightning and to be buried at Cynosurae. A third Aesculapius was son of Arsippus and Arsinoe and is said to have been the first to use purgative medicines and to extract teeth. His tomb and a grove sacred to him may be seen in Arcadia not far from the river Lusius.

‘The oldest of the Apollos is the son of Vulcan, whom I mentioned just now, the protector of Athens. The second was a son of Corybas, born in Crete, who is said to have fought with Jupiter himself for the mastery of the island. The third was the son of the third Jupiter and Latona. This is the Apollo who tradition says came to Delphi from the land of the Hyperboreans. The fourth is the Arcadian Apollo, who was called “Nomios” by the Arcadians, to whom he gave their laws.

‘There are also several Dianas. The first is the daughter of Jupiter and Proserpine, who is said to have been the mother of the winged Cupid. The second however is the more famous one. She is said to

have been a daughter of the third Jupiter and of Latona. There is also a third who is said to have been the daughter of Upis and Glauce, whom the Greeks often call by her father's name of Upis.

‘There are also quite a number of gods called Dionysus. First there is the son of Jupiter and Proserpine. Then a second who is a son of Nilus, and figures in legend as the destroyer of Nysa. The third was a son of Cabirus, who is said to have ruled over Asia. In his honour the festival of the Sabazia was introduced. A fourth was a son of Jupiter and the Moon-Goddess; the Orphic rites are believed to be celebrated in his honour. The fifth is the son of Nisus and Thyone, and is believed to have founded the Trieterid festival.

‘The first Venus was the daughter of the Sky-God and the Goddess of Day, and I have seen her temple at Elis. The second Venus was born of the sea-foam and is said to have been the mother by Mercury of the second Cupid. A third Venus was the daughter of Jupiter and Dione. She was the wife of Vulcan but she also bore a son, Anteros, to the war-god Mars. A fourth came from Syria and Cyprus.* She is called Astarte and is said to have been the bride of Adonis.

‘The first Minerva is the one I have already mentioned, the mother of Apollo. The second is a daughter of Nilus, and the Egyptians worship her at Sais. The third is the daughter of Jupiter, whom I have also already mentioned. The fourth is the child of Jupiter and Coryphe, the daughter of Oceanus. The Arcadians call her “Koria” and say that she invented the four-horse chariot. The fifth is the daughter of Pallas, who is said to have killed her father when he tried to assault her. This is the one who is represented with wings on her heels.

‘The first Cupid is said to have been the son of Mercury and the first Diana. The second is the son of Mercury and the second Venus. The third is the same as Anteros and is the son of Mars and the third Venus.

‘All this and much more of the same kind may be gathered from the ancient legends of the Greeks, and you will see that such fables must be discredited, if religion itself is not to be brought into confusion and disrepute. But the philosophers of your school do not refute them. They even tend to confirm them by their systematizing methods of interpretation. But let us now return to the point from which we digressed.

‘Surely you do not imagine that any very subtle arguments are needed to refute these views of yours? Reason, Faith, Hope, Courage, Honour, Triumph, Salvation, Concord and the rest – these, it is plain to see, are things, not gods. Either they are qualities inherent in ourselves, such as Reason, Faith, Courage, Concord, or they are objects of desire, such as Honour, Salvation, Victory. I recognize their

importance and I know that in fact statues are dedicated to them. But why divine power should dwell in them, I shall understand only when I can grasp the reason for it. Fortune too might well be included in their number, Fortune who is always associated with fickleness and whim, qualities which are certainly not worthy of a goddess.

‘Why then do you Stoics take such pleasure in the interpretation of these fables and the derivations of names? Caelus was mutilated by his own son and Saturn was bound in chains by his. But you put up such a defence for these and similar stories that those who invented them are made to appear not as lunatics but men of genius.

‘And your derivations of the names of gods are pitifully laboured.* Saturn, because he is “sated” with years. Mavors because he “overturns the great”. Minerva, because she “threatens” or “levels down”. Venus, because “she comes to all”. Ceres, because she “bears” the fruits of the earth! What wild speculation all this is! And for some names you will be stuck without a derivation at all. What mask are you going to fasten on Veiovis? Or on Vulcan? Although, as you think the name Neptune is derived from “nare” (to swim), there is probably no name for which you cannot provide some derivation through the similarity of a single letter. In all this you seem to be more at sea than Neptune himself!

‘But all this was a great and quite unnecessary labour which Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus undertook – this effort to give a rational meaning to imaginary stories and to give reasons for the names by which all the gods are called. And in so doing, you admit right away that the facts are very different from the popular belief, because the beings which are called gods are really natural forces and not personal deities at all.

‘From this source such error has arisen that even the powers of evil have been given the names of gods and have become the objects of religious cults. On the Palatine Hill we see a shrine dedicated to Fever and another to Bereavement close to the temple of the Household Gods. Not to mention an altar to Misfortune on the Esquiline. It is the task of philosophers to dispel all such errors, so that when we talk about the immortal gods we may say only what is worthy of them. I have my own beliefs about the gods, but they are not yours. You say that Neptune is a conscious intelligence permeating the oceans of the world and that Ceres is a conscious intelligence permeating the whole earth. But such an intelligence permeating earth and sea is not only incomprehensible to me, I cannot even conjecture what manner of intelligence it could be. So I have to look elsewhere for my evidence of the existence and nature of the gods. My gods are very different from those which you commend to my belief.

‘So now, what else have we to consider? First, is the world governed by divine providence? Are the gods concerned with the fortunes of mankind? These two questions still remain from your analysis. They are, you will agree, questions which demand a closely reasoned answer.’

‘Certainly they do,’ said Velleius, ‘and I have great hopes of your arguments, as I am in full agreement with what you have said so far.’

‘I do not want to interrupt you, Cotta,’ said Balbus, ‘so let us resume these arguments at another time. I shall soon win you over, but...’

[Here there is a lacuna in the text. Cotta is now speaking about the misuse of reason by mankind]

He will try this way and that but all in vain
However hard he strives with might and main:
Could I entreat him with such flattering speech
For my own ends?*

Is Medea not here using her reason in a way which will destroy herself?

‘Again, there is reason in the saying:

Who wishes what they will, the event will yield
To their persistence.†

Yet in this verse is the origin of every kind of mischief.

Warped is his mind and today he has given me
The keys which shall unlock the gates of wrath
And bring him to perdition. Sorrow to me,
And grief to him. To him destruction, and to me
Exile....*

‘Is this that power of reason, that boon which you allege has been given to man alone by the grace of the gods, and denied to the beasts? A fine gift this which they have given us! Look too at Medea when she fled from her father and her fatherland,

And when her father pressed her close
And made to capture her, she took the boy,
Dismembered him, divided up his limbs,
And scattered all his body through the fields,
That while the father gathered up his son,
So sown in pieces, she might herself escape,
Restrain her father in a chain of grief

And win her safety by her brother's death.[†]

‘Could any deed have been more criminal – or more rational? And when Atreus prepared that ghastly banquet for his brother, did he not ponder deep and long upon the deed?

A greater work of evil must I wreak

To bruise and break therewith his bitter heart.[‡]

‘We ought not to pass over Thyestes himself, who “was not content to tempt his brother’s wife”. As Atreus well and truly says of him,

In great affairs methinks great peril lurks,

If royal mothers are to be debauched

By such as would defile the royal blood,

Infect our stock, adulterate our race.

But was it not a shrewd enough idea, to use adultery to win a throne?

But to me [said Atreus] the father of the gods

Has sent an omen to preserve my crown,

A lamb among my flock with fleece of gold,

Which this Thyestes stole from out my halls

And made my wife accomplice to the deed.

A great villain, but rational enough!

‘It is not the stage alone which is full of such crimes. We see even greater ones in daily life. In family life at home, in the law-courts, in the council-chamber, at the hustings, in foreign and colonial service, men use their reason both for good and evil. But it is only a few, and those rarely, who use it for good, while many use it constantly for evil. So that it would have been better if the immortal gods had not endowed us with reason at all, rather than given us so calamitous a gift. Wine is seldom beneficial and very often harmful to the sick. It is therefore better never to prescribe it at all than to run a grave risk for the sake of a dubious hope of cure. Similarly I cannot but wonder whether it would not have been better if mankind had never been endowed at all with this nimble-wittedness, this shrewdness, this cunning, which we call “reason”. As it profits only a few, and is a curse to many, it is a pity that it has been so widely and so generously bestowed. It would have been better if it had not been given at all. If the divine mind willed the good of men, when it endowed them with reason, then it willed only the good of those whom it also endowed with the power to use their reason well, whom we see to be few indeed, if any. But the gods would not will the good of a few men only. So it follows that they have not willed the good of any.

‘Philosophers of your school usually reply to this argument by saying that the fact that many men perversely misuse the gift of the gods does not mean we are not excellently provided for by them. Many sons misuse their inheritance, but it does not follow from this that they have received no benefit from their fathers. No one says it does, but the two cases are entirely different. Deianira did not intend to harm Hercules, when she gave him the tunic steeped in the blood of the centaur. The soldier did not intend to help Jason, when he opened with a sword-cut the ulcer which the doctors could not heal. Many have helped when they wished to hinder and hindered when they wished to help. So the intention of the donor is not always apparent in the gift. If the recipient makes good use of it, it still does not follow that it was given with a good intent. Lust and greed and crime are never realized in deed without conscious premeditation and are not carried through without the exercise of the mind and intelligence, that is to say, without the use of reason. Every judgement is an act of reasoning. Of good reasoning, if the judgement is true. Of bad reasoning, if it is false. This power of reason which the gods have given to us, if they have given it at all, is a neutral thing. It depends upon ourselves whether it is used for good or evil. It is not something bequeathed to us by the gods out of kindness, like an inheritance. Indeed, what more poisonous gift could they have given, if they had wanted to destroy mankind? Reason underlies all our vices and is the seed of injustice, intemperance and cowardice.

‘We have spoken of the rational plans and calculations of such heroic and legendary characters as Atreus and Medea in their monstrous and deliberate crimes. But what about the buffoons of comedy? Are they always devoid of reason? Not a bit of it. Listen to this subtle piece of argument from a character in *The Eunuch*.*

What’s now to do?

She shut me out, and now she calls me in.

Well, shal I go? No, not if she should beg

On bended knee.

‘Then there is the character in *The Young Companions*,* who does not scruple to use reason to contradict common opinion in a manner worthy of an Academician, when he says that “it is sweet to be head over heels in love and debt”, and sweet

To have a boorish miser for a father,

A very martinet towards his sons,

Who neither loves you nor cares aught about you.

This incredible opinion he supports with some paradoxical arguments:

So can one easier cheat him of his rent,
Or forge his signature to win a debt,
Or make use of his slaves to cozen him.
And what a pleasure it can be to spend
The money taken from a penny-pincher.

Then he goes on to argue that an easy-going and generous father is really a calamity to a son in love, because

How can one cheat him, or how steal from him,
What trick or stratagem devise against him?
One is frustrated, when a father's love
So strangles every wile and trick and ruse.

“These “wiles” and “stratagems”, these “tricks” and “ruses” – is there no reason in them? What a wonderful gift of the gods that enables Phormio to say,

Bring on the dotard. All my plans are ripe.

‘But let us leave the theatre and visit the law-courts. A magistrate is about to take his seat to try a case about arson at the record office. What could be more underhand than that? Yet Quintus Sosius, a distinguished Roman knight from Picenum, confessed to it. In a case about tampering with the public accounts Lucius Alenus was guilty, when he forged the handwriting of the six senior clerks of the Treasury – as cunning a rascal as you could find! Think of other cases – of the theft of the gold of Tolosa,* or of the Jugurthine conspiracy. Think of earlier cases, such as the bribery of Tubulus to give false judgement, and of later ones, such as the accusation of incest which Peducaeus brought. Similar cases under the new law are now everyday occurrences – assassinations, poisonings, embezzlements and forgery of wills. Reason is the origin of the charge “I declare that a theft has been committed with your aid and advice”. Hence come all those trials for bad faith and misconduct in guardianships, commissions, partnerships, trusteeships and all the other types of case which may arise from breach of faith in buying, selling, hiring or letting out on lease. So we now have public jurisdiction over private matters under the Plaetorian law,† and also that net to embrace offences of all sorts, the “action for malicious fraud”, introduced by our friend Gaius Aquilius, who has also extended the definition of “fraud” to include the pretence of doing one thing while actually doing another.

‘Well, are we to believe that such a crop of evil was sown by the immortal gods? If the gods gave man reason then they made him a

villain. Villainy is merely reason allied to craft and deception for an evil purpose. So in your view the gods become responsible for fraud, felony and all misdemeanours of this sort; as none of them could be conceived or carried through without the use of reason. So we may echo the wish of the old nurse in the tragedy,

Oh that the fir-tree in the Pelian woods
Had never fallen to the axe's stroke.*

and wish that the gods had never given man your fatal gift of reason! Few use it well, and those who do are all too often destroyed by those who use it badly – and they are legion. So this divine gift of reason and foresight seems to have been imparted to corrupt mankind rather than to make them good.

‘You argue that man is to blame for all this and not the gods. As well might a doctor blame the gravity of the disease or a pilot the violence of the storm. Coming from a mere man such an excuse would be ridiculous. “Who would have any need of your services,” one would reply, “if there were no diseases and no storms?” A god one could rebut more forcibly still. “You gods say that the fault lies in the vices of mankind. But you could have endowed men with reason in a form which would exclude all vice and crime.” How then did the gods come to make such a mistake? We men bequeath an inheritance in the hope of passing on something of benefit to our sons. In this we can be mistaken. But how can a god make mistakes? Yet the Sun-God did so, when he allowed Phaethon to drive his chariot. Neptune did so, when he allowed his son Theseus the fulfilment of three wishes, and so enabled him to bring about the death of Hippolytus.

‘These are the tales of the poets. We aim, however, to be philosophers, and to deal in facts not fables. But even these poetical gods, if they knew that their gifts would prove harmful to their sons, may be thought to have shown a misguided kindness in giving them. Aristo of Chios often used to say that philosophers did more harm than good to those of their pupils who misunderstood the truths they taught. In this way the school of Aristippus could easily produce libertines and the school of Zeno misanthropes. If this is true, and the student is going to leave the lecture-room a worse man than when he entered it, because of his own mistaken interpretations of philosophical arguments, it would be better for the philosophers to keep silent rather than to corrupt their students in this way. Similarly, if the gods have given reason to mankind with good intent, but men misuse the gift to injure and deceive, it would have been better not to have given it at all.

‘If the patient for whom a doctor prescribes wine is going to drink it

neat and die of it, and the doctor knows this, then he is much to blame for prescribing it. In the same way this "Providence" of yours is blameworthy, who gave reason to those who she well knew would pervert it to an evil use. Perhaps you will say she did not know this? I wish you would say this, but you do not dare. For we all know how high you rate the name of "Providence"!

'So much for this argument. All the philosophers agree that folly is a greater evil than all the ills of the body or the blows of fortune which can be weighed against it. Yet no one really attains to wisdom. We are all desperately sick, and yet you say that the gods have done their best for us. Just as it makes no difference whether nobody is well or nobody can be well, so I do not see that it makes any difference whether nobody is wise or nobody can be wise.

'But there is no need to labour the obvious. Telamon in a single line sums up the whole argument that the gods are indifferent to man,

It would be well with the good, if they cared,
And ill with the bad.
But things are never so....*

'If the gods had the good of the human race at heart, then they ought to have made all men good. If that were too much to ask, then they should at least do their best for those who are good. How then did it come about that in Spain the Carthaginians defeated the two Scipios, the bravest and the best of men? Why did Maximus have to bury the consul who was his own son? Why did Hannibal destroy Marcellus? Why did Paulus suffer a crushing defeat at Cannae? Why was the person of Regulus delivered up to the atrocities of the Carthaginians? Why was not Scipio Africanus safe in his own home?

'These are all examples from history, and they could be multiplied. But let us look at some more recent instances. Why has my uncle, Publius Rutilius, a scholar and a gentleman, been driven into exile? Why was my colleague Drusus murdered in his own house? Why was the High Priest Quintus Scaevola, a model of temperance and prudence, assassinated before the statue of Vesta? Why were so many of our leading citizens massacred by Cinna? How could Gaius Marius, the most treacherous of men, hound to his death so respected a citizen as Quintus Catulus? Time would fail me if I tried to list all the good men for whom things have turned out badly. So it would if I tried to mention all the wicked who have prospered. Why should a Marius be seven times consul, and then die at a ripe old age in his own bed? Why should a cruel monster like Cinna have so long a lease of terror?

'You may argue that in the end he paid the penalty for his crimes. But it would surely have been better if in the first place he had been

prevented from killing so many of our best men rather than that he should himself be punished for it at some later time? Quintus Varius, a most desperate character, himself died an agonizing death. If this was the penalty he paid for stabbing Drusus and poisoning Metellus, it was well deserved. But it would have been better if both his victims had been saved. For thirty-eight years Dionysius was ruler of a rich and flourishing city. And in earlier times for how many years was Pisistratus the tyrant of Athens, the very flower of Greece! It is true that other tyrants such as Phalaris and Apollodorus suffered for their evil deeds. But how many people had they already killed or tortured? It is true too that many robbers are brought to justice, but can we deny that more captives die a bitter death than do robbers? It is said that Anaxarchus, a follower of Democritus, was pounded to death in a mortar by order of the tyrant of Cyprus, and Zeno of Elea was also tortured to death. And as for Socrates, the description of his death in Plato has often brought tears to my eyes. So you see that if the gods do look down upon our human world, they make no difference in their judgement between good and bad.

‘Diogenes the Cynic used to say that Harpalus, who was regarded as one of the most successful robbers of his time, was a living witness against the gods, because he enjoyed so long a run of good luck. I have already mentioned Dionysius. This man, after pillaging the temple of Proserpina at Locri, set sail for Syracuse and enjoyed such a fair wind through the voyage that he said in jest, “See, my friends, how the gods repay my sacrilege.” This shrewd character saw the truth clearly enough and never found cause to alter his opinion. When he made a naval expedition to the Peloponnese and came to the temple of the Olympian Jupiter, he stripped off from the statue of the god a heavy cloak of gold, with which it had been adorned by the tyrant Gelo from booty taken from the Carthaginians. And while he was about it he joked that a cloak of gold was heavy in summer and cold in winter. So he gave the god a woollen one instead, which he said would be suitable for any time of year. This same man ordered the golden beard to be wrenched off the statue of Aesculapius at Epidaurus, saying that it was not proper for the son to sport a beard when his father Apollo had none. He also had all the silver tables removed from the temples. These tables were all inscribed in the old Greek style as belonging to “the kindly gods”, and Dionysius said that he was pleased to take advantage of their kindness. He also had no qualms about carrying off the golden statuettes of Victory, and the bowls and crowns, which the statues of the gods held in their outstretched hands, saying that he was merely accepting what they offered. “It would be silly,” said he, “to pray to the gods for their gifts, and then to ignore them when they are on offer.” They say also that

he used to exhibit these spoils of the temples in the market-place and have them sold by auction. But after he had collected the money, he ordered all the buyers to restore the sacred objects which they had bought to the temples from which they came. In this way he combined mockery of the gods with the swindling of his fellow-man.

‘In spite of all this, Olympian Jupiter never struck this man with a thunderbolt, neither did Aesculapius destroy him with some dreadful lingering disease. He died in his bed and had a royal funeral. The throne which he had seized by crime he bequeathed as an inheritance to his son, as though it had been fairly and legitimately won.

‘I am reluctant to follow up this line of argument, as it seems to play into the hands of the criminal. And so it would, if virtue and vice were not deep matters of our own conscience, quite apart from any gift of reason from the gods. If conscience goes, then everything collapses around us. But no house or state can be regarded as an example of reason and discipline if good deeds go unrewarded and crimes unpunished. By the same token, there can be no divine guidance of human affairs if the gods make no distinction between good and evil.

‘Perhaps you will say that the gods disregard trivial matters, and do not bother about a few acres of land or a tiny vineyard. Perhaps we cannot expect Jupiter to be put out every time somebody suffers loss by blight or tempest. Even in a human kingdom, the king does not concern himself with every detail. Just as I myself a short time back was not complaining about the affair of Rutilius’s farm at Formiae but about the threat to his person.*

‘Men generally agree that they have the gods to thank for their material goods, such as their vineyards, cornfields and orange-groves, with their abundant harvests, and all the comfort and prosperity of their lives. But nobody ever accounts his own virtues as a gift from God. And rightly so, because we are entitled to praise for our virtues, and are justly proud of them, which we could not be if we derived them from a god and not from our own nature. But when we prosper in our public or private life, or experience some stroke of luck, or escape some calamity, then we give thanks to the gods and take no credit for ourselves. But did anyone ever thank the gods that he was a good man? No, he thanks them for his honours, or his wealth, or his personal safety. Men name Jupiter as the best and greatest of the gods, not because he makes us just or temperate or wise but because he keeps us safe and sound in health and wealth. Nobody ever promised to pay a tithe to Hercules† if the god would make him a good man. They do say that Pythagoras, whenever he had discovered a new theorem in geometry, used to sacrifice an ox to the Muses, but I do not believe it, because he refused even to make a sacrifice to Apollo of Delos, as he would not spill blood upon his altar.

‘It is the general opinion of mankind that we must seek our good fortune from the gods but look for wisdom in ourselves. We may consecrate shrines to Reason, Faith and Virtue, but we know that it is only in ourselves that they are to be found. But from the gods we ask the fulfilment of our hopes of safety, wealth and success. Therefore the prosperity and good fortune of the wicked, as Diogenes so often said, absolutely disprove the power of the gods.

‘You say that a good man often dies a good death? Yes, we seize upon examples of this and then attribute them without any reason to the beneficence of the gods. Diagoras the Atheist once visited Samothrace and a friend there said to him, “You think the gods have no care for man? Why, you can see from all these votive pictures here how many people have escaped the fury of storms at sea by praying to the gods, who have brought them safe to harbour.” “Yes, indeed,” said Diagoras, “but where are the pictures of all those who suffered shipwreck and perished in the waves?” On another occasion he was on a voyage and the crew became anxious and alarmed about the bad weather and began to mutter that it served them right for taking an atheist on board. Diagoras just pointed out to them a number of other ships on the same course which were in equal difficulties and asked them whether they thought that there was a Diagoras on the passenger-list of every one of them. The fact is that a man’s character or way of life make no difference at all to his good luck or his bad.

‘Balbus tells us that the gods, like human monarchs, cannot keep an eye on everything. This is not a true comparison. If a king knowingly connives at crime, then he is much to blame. And a god can never plead ignorance. You produce an astonishing defence for the gods by saying that their power is so great that even if a criminal by his death escapes the penalty for his crimes, it will still be exacted from his children, his grandchildren and his descendants! This is justice indeed! Is there any state which would tolerate the introduction of a law which would make a son or a descendant responsible for the crimes of his father or grandfather?

The house of Tantalus – is it to suffer then
Destruction without end? The death of Myrtilus –
Is there to be no penalty enough
To wash away the stain?*

‘Whether the poets have corrupted the Stoic philosophers, or the philosophers have given authority to the poets, it would be hard to say. They both deal in marvels and monstrosities. The man stung by the satire of Hipponax or by a verse of Archilochus did not nurse a pain sent by a god but one arising from his own faults. When we

contemplate the lusts of Aegisthus or Paris, we do not put the blame on a god, when their own guilt almost cries aloud. I do not ascribe the cure of numbers of sick men to Aesculapius but to Hippocrates. And I would not say that the Lacedemonian rule of life was given to Sparta by Apollo rather than Lycurgus. In my view it was Critolaus who destroyed Corinth and Hasdrubal who destroyed Carthage.[†] It was these two mortal men who gouged out those eyes of the sea-coast and not some angry god, who on your own showing could not feel anger anyway.

‘Could not a god have come to the rescue and saved those great and splendid cities? You are always saying that there is nothing which a god cannot do, and do easily. As easily as a man can move his limbs in obedience to his thought and will, so you say the divine power of a god can create, set in motion, or transform anything at will. You do not offer this belief as a superstition and an old wives’ tale, but as a reasoned proposition of physical science. You argue that matter, which comprises and composes all things, is malleable and changeable throughout the universe. Everything can be fashioned from it by a sort of instant transformation. The power which can so mould and transform it is the divine Providence, which when it sets itself in motion in any direction can accomplish anything it pleases. It follows from this theory of yours that this divine Providence is either unaware of its own powers or is indifferent to human life. Or else it is unable to judge what is best. “Providence is not concerned with individuals,” you say. I can well believe it. It does not even care about nations. Nations? It does not even care about whole peoples and races, and so we need not be surprised if it shows contempt for mankind altogether.

‘And when you say that the gods cannot be concerned with everything, in the same breath you say that they send different dreams to different men. I mention this because of the theory which you Stoics hold about the truth of dreams. You also say that it is proper for men to make vows to the gods. But vows are made by individuals, so the divine mind does give heed to the concerns of the individual? So, you see, this divine mind cannot be quite so busy as you thought. But even suppose it is at full stretch, turning the sky, protecting the earth, calming the sea, why does it permit all the other gods to idle about doing nothing? Why not appoint some of those who are unemployed to be Commissioners of Human Affairs? There seem to be any number of them available.

‘Now all this that I have said about the nature of the gods was not said in denial of their existence, but to make you realize how difficult a question this is and how dubious is every theory which has been evolved to answer it.’

When Cotta had finished, Lucilius said, ‘Well, Cotta, you have made

an exceedingly violent attack on the views of the Stoics, although in my view their theory of the Providence of God has been evolved out of a spirit of piety and bears itself the mark of Providence. But it is growing late, and you must let us answer you some other day. I shall then take up arms against you on behalf of our hearths and altars, the shrines and temples of our gods, and the walls of our city, which you of the priesthood have taught us to venerate as sacred. Indeed you have been more zealous to gird our city with religion than with battlements. I would account it shameful if I were now to abandon these things so long as there is breath in my body to defend them.'

'I too hope that you can refute my arguments,' said Cotta. 'I myself have been concerned to discuss the doctrines I have dealt with rather than to condemn them out of hand. So I am sure that you will easily get the better of me.'

'I should doubt it,' said Velleius, 'when he thinks that even our dreams are sent to us by Jupiter. Although even dreams have more substance than a Stoic discourse on the nature of the gods.'

This then was the end of our discussion and we went our ways, Velleius thinking that Cotta had the best of the argument while to me it seemed that the reasoning of Balbus brought us nearer to an image of the truth.*

FRAGMENTS

1. Cicero was well aware that the objects of human worship were false. For after saying a number of things tending to subvert religion, he adds that 'these matters should not be discussed in public, as such discussion might destroy the established religion.' (Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, ii.3.2)

2. Cicero in his discussion of the nature of the gods asserts that 'in the first place it is improbable that the material substance which is the origin of all things was created by divine Providence. It has and has always had a force and nature of its own. A carpenter who is going to build something does not make his own wood, but uses what is ready to hand. A modeller does the same with his wax. In the same way your divine Providence ought to have been furnished with material, not made by itself but presented ready-made. But if matter was not created by God, neither were earth, water, air and fire.' (Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, ii.8.10)

3. Tullius in his work *On the Nature of the Gods* said that the 'Great Year' comprises three thousand (calendar) years. (Servius on Virgil's *Aeneid*, iii.284)

4. 'Spirabile' (breathable) is in the style of Cicero, although he used 'spiritabile' in his books on *The Nature of the Gods*. (Servius on *Aeneid*, iii.600)

5. By 'the gate of horn' the eyes are meant, which are both horny and harder than other parts of the body; for they do not feel cold, as Cicero also said in his books on *The Nature of the Gods*. (Servius on *Aeneid*, vi. 894)

6. We cannot be persuaded that this immortal and sublime nature is sexually divided into male and female. (Arnobius, 3.6)

7. Cicero in the third book of his work on *The Nature of the Gods*: 'Man takes precedence over all the beasts.' (Diomedes, I.313.10)

IMAGINARY CONTINUATION OF THE DIALOGUE

by J. M. Ross

WHEN my untimely and shameful death took me away from the world of men, which I had served so well both in statesmanship and in philosophy, I was immediately removed to the Elysian Fields. Here not only did I find again my dear daughter Tullia, whose early death had so saddened my own last years on earth, but I was also able to converse in person with the great philosophers of the past whom I had previously known only through their books. Not only was I put in contact with the past: I was equally naturalized into the future, for in Elysium all time is simultaneous. Not long after my arrival there I found myself one day in conversation with two gentlemen who had been silently and invisibly listening to our discussion at Cotta's house on the nature of the gods. One of these auditors was a Christian writer of the early fourth century named Lactantius, who was a great admirer of my writings and honoured me not only by modelling his style on mine but by making some use of my treatise on the gods in his *Divine Institutions*.^{*} The other was an Englishman named Thomas Godless who died in the year 1970. Though he died young and is not known to fame, he was a keen student of the philosophy of religion and is representative of many in the twentieth century who find themselves unable to believe in the existence of any divine being.

I asked Lactantius if he would care to begin by offering his comments on the dialogue he had been listening to. 'With the greatest of pleasure,' he replied. 'I listened to the whole discussion from start to finish and found it most interesting. I could make many comments on a variety of matters, pointing out the soundness of this argument and the weakness of that, and drawing parallels from subsequent writers, but in order not to try your patience too much I will confine myself as far as possible to the essentials as I see them. (If what I shall say does not altogether agree with what I wrote on earth, that is because since I came here I have enlarged my outlook and corrected some of my previous views by contact with theologians of many different centuries.)

'It seems to me that the essential matter discussed among you was whether there are any gods at all in any meaningful sense, that is to say, a divine being or beings whom men can honestly worship and

who make a difference to what happens on earth. All three speakers contended that there were gods of some kind, but they differed in the reasons they gave for this belief. In fact at least five distinct reasons were given in the course of the discussion. (1) Velleius relied on the universal belief of all mankind, as if “Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong” (Book I, Sections 43–45); Balbus supported this by appealing to the fact that many people had seen visions of gods (II.6). (2) Balbus relied principally on the regularity of nature and the evidences of a beneficent providence (II.4–19, 47–58, 81–168). (3) But he also presented a number of abstract chains of reasoning to prove that there must be a supreme intelligent power (II.20–37). (4) In addition he argued that because the future can be foretold, it must be divinely ordained (II.7–12). (5) Cotta on the other hand believed in gods simply out of respect to tradition, and required no other reason (III.4–10).

‘As presented in your discussion, none of these reasons seems to me satisfactory. (1) The first relies on fallible human experience and makes the gods about as credible as sea-serpents, fairies, and flying saucers; in any case this line of argument is invalid for a reason which I will develop in a moment – it argues to the unique nature of God from everyday experience, and makes him no more than an observed phenomenon, whereas he is in fact the reality behind all phenomena. (2) The same objection applies to the second argument; it brings God down to the human level by making him a kind of super-engineer, delighting in regularity and in providing an efficient environment for the human race. (3) The abstract arguments again begin from the wrong starting-point and build up a logical construction rather than a real God. (4) Supposing the future can be predicted – and I do not deny that there is reliable evidence for what the twentieth century will call precognition – this does not prove that the future is determined, still less that there must be a divinity to determine it. The facts prove no more than that in special conditions the human mind can slide about in time and observe, from one point in time, what is being freely chosen at another. (5) Cotta’s reason is no reason at all, but could God really be God if there were no reason but mere tradition for believing in him?

‘Nevertheless, although none of these reasons as argued in your discussion seems to me to be satisfactory, there is an element of truth in most of them. Let me take up first arguments (1) and (5). In religion as in all other matters respect should certainly be paid to tradition, not simply as such, but because it embodies the wisdom of gifted men who have devoted earnest study to the matter. Respect should also be paid to the general experience of humanity, not to the superstitious imaginings of terror-stricken rustics, but to the

experience of great saints, mystics and theologians who have deliberately exposed themselves to the divine and probed into its nature. From such sources we learn that if there is a God, he is quite different from any other being in the universe – infinite yet personal, both in time and out of it, operating in space but not located in space. Such a being is not to be known except by methods appropriate to his nature. Just as we use different methods to study geology, to get to know a friend, and to distinguish good paintings from bad, so we need to use a method different again if we are to obtain knowledge of God. To demand that we shall know God only through methods appropriate to other fields of inquiry is rather like discarding all the seven centuries of harmonic music from Perotin to Messiaen as nothing but meaningless sound just because its message cannot be expressed in words or pictures. Similarly if, as Cotta rightly pointed out (I.80–84), God's nature cannot be expressed in human or stellar terms, that does not necessarily mean that God does not exist, or that he is neither personal nor effective.

‘How, then, can we know God? The key principle is to stop trying to build him up out of our human imagination (which is often just a disguised way of inflating our egoistical pride), and instead to allow God to seize us and impose himself on us. In the same way the scientist does not achieve good results until he stops imposing his ideas on nature and instead places himself under obedience to nature; the historian, too, must stop reading his own times and ideas back into history and instead allow the facts to impose themselves on him. The parallel goes further. The scientist and the historian must pursue their inquiries by methods appropriate to their subject-matter and not bring in God as a cause for otherwise unexplained occurrences (and this incidentally is good theology as well as good science, because God is not just one among a number of causes). Likewise the theologian must look for God by theological insight and reflection, and not by the application of scientific method or by projecting human nature into the sky.

‘This was the error made both by the Epicureans and by the Stoics when they made the nature of the gods corporeal and spatial. To the Epicureans the gods were just a coterie of rather superior Epicurean philosophers occupying a particular part of space. To the Stoics God was either made of fire, or was another name for the whole material universe, or was its outer covering. Cotta was quite right in exposing the absurdity of all these conceptions. If God is part of the created order he is subject to change and decay like the rest of the created order (III.29); what Cotta did not see so clearly is that God is not part of the created order, but its Creator, so that the refutation of these Stoic and Epicurean misconceptions does not detract at all from the

reality of God's existence. As an instinctive believer in traditional religion and of its necessity for the sake of morality, he ought to have gone on to develop a more positive case for God's existence. Can there really be (he might have asked) morality or truth or great art unless they derive from an absolute or ultimate realm of a different kind from our relativities? Take morals, for instance. The real question in morals is not what is good – there can be endless opinions about that, because moral goodness is a matter of degree and capable of endless improvement: the important thing is what is right. Even if some of us have no sense of personal duty, no conviction that certain actions are absolutely binding on us, we generally believe that other people owe such duties to us – that there are such things as absolute rights which cry out to heaven to be satisfied. If ethics is simply a matter of relative tastes and preferences, why do people get so passionately concerned about righting the wrongs of the oppressed? – because the relativities of moral judgement rest upon an absolute basis. In other words, whether we admit it or not, we believe in a God who cares about justice. We must therefore pursue the search for God, but by other methods than those used by the Epicureans and Stoics.

‘Now I should like to make some further comment on these two philosophies, because they represent types of thought which will continue to prove attractive to many people for another twenty centuries or more. Epicureanism, by starting with bare atoms and reducing everything to the physical, could never find room for a God that has any real involvement with the world or influence on it. This will appeal to many simple souls from the sixteenth century onwards who want to cut religion down to the Procrustean bed of a unitary science. Some will be outside the Christian Church; others, under the name of deists or radical Christians, will try to remain within it. But they will find they cannot pray to an effective God: their prayers return to them from the sounding-board which they have erected between themselves and God. Their prayers are no more than meditations, for God has become simply an echo of their own thoughts and desires. No wonder some of them will say “God is dead.” This may solve for some people the problem of how to get peace of mind for themselves, but it is a self-centred solution (to Epicurus even the gods live a thoroughly self-centred existence), and dodges the real problem, which is how to be at peace with the ultimate – how can finite, foolish, evil-hearted man be on terms with the universe as a whole?

‘Stoicism makes the opposite error. Instead of cutting God off from the world, it identifies the two. This also will prove attractive at various times to many within the next twenty centuries. (It will be partly in reaction from neo-Stoicism that from the seventeenth century

neo-Epicureanism will divorce God from the world.) But Stoicism too bypasses the real problem. By identifying man with God it pretends that no reconciliation is necessary. But the identification cannot be maintained as a credible solution in face of the evident evil and pain in the world. Sooner or later the best of pure pantheists will wonder how the badness of men and the cruelty of nature can really be divine. The Stoic can hardly say God is imperfect, so he is driven to make a distinction between God and the world. But this only reveals the real problem without solving it.

‘I submit that the better view is to regard God as distinct from nature but closely involved with it, and that man can be at peace not only with himself but with God, by crossing the divide between nature and God over the bridge which God himself has provided, that is to say by linking himself to Jesus Christ, in whom God became man. This is not the place for an exposition of what this means in detail and in practice. I will simply say that the man who accepts the reconciliation provided in Christ will remain distinct from God, yet intimately bound up with him and open to the influences of what Christians call sanctifying grace.’

Lactantius seemed to have completed his discourse, but Thomas Godless was not satisfied, and asked leave to put four questions to him.

‘My first difficulty,’ he said, ‘is that you do not seem to have been any better able than the Stoics to solve the problem of evil. How is the existence of pain and evil in the world compatible with your view that the world is under the care of an infinitely powerful and infinitely loving God? Cotta’s objections (III.66–92) remain unanswered.’ To which Lactantius replied, ‘Thomas, I give you two answers. First, if Christianity offers men reconciliation with God, it is not required to solve every intellectual difficulty. But secondly, Christianity does provide a better answer to this age-old problem than Stoicism, because Stoicism is in principle deterministic, whereas the Christian God has given freedom of choice to man, and perhaps also to some extent to the world of nature. He wants all things to serve him, not as automata but by free choice; but this gift of freedom involves the risk that man will choose evil rather than good. If God refrains from punishing the wicked in this world (III.79–92), that is a sign not of his powerlessness but of his magnanimity. Epicurus insisted on human freedom, but at the expense of the gods’ reality; the Stoics insisted on divine omnipotence, but at the expense of human freedom. Christianity allows for both.’

‘My second question,’ continued Thomas, ‘is that if man is free, the future cannot be predicted; but then what becomes of God’s omniscience? This is a problem that greatly perplexed you on earth,

Marcus Tullius, as is evident from your books *On Fate* and *On Divination*.’

‘I see no difficulty here,’ replied Lactantius. ‘Surely if all time lies open to God, he can see beforehand what men will choose to do in the exercise of the freedom he has given them; he retains power to interfere with that freedom but does not normally exercise it. As Augustine of Hippo will say,^{*} we acknowledge God’s omniscience in order to believe well of him, while we acknowledge human freedom in order to live well.’[†]

‘Thirdly,’ asked Thomas, ‘if there is a God who wants men to believe in him, surely he would have left such evidence that men could not fail to acknowledge him, instead of leaving the matter in such uncertainty.’

‘But,’ answered Lactantius, ‘what kind of evidence could have achieved this purpose? Either God would have had to transform himself into a being detectable by science or history or other natural means of inquiry, in which case he would have ceased to be God; or he would have impressed on all men’s minds an irresistible conviction of his existence, in which case he would have taken away their freedom of belief.’

‘Fourthly,’ continued Thomas, ‘I would like to know what answer you would give to Velleius’s question (I.18–23) – what was God doing before time began?’

‘My answer,’ replied Lactantius, ‘is in the words which Martin Luther will use in reply to the identical question many centuries hence: “He was sitting in a birch wood cutting rods to beat people who ask impertinent questions.”’^{*,*}

I then asked Thomas to comment on the whole dialogue from his point of view.

‘I agree,’ he said, ‘that Lactantius has correctly stated the main point at issue, which is whether any deity has more than a merely notional existence. I am glad he was so candid about the inadequacy of the five reasons given during the dialogue for the existence of the gods. I would go further and say that no reliance can be placed on any of them, and this means that they become no more convincing when added together. (The number and variety of the Stoic arguments seems to show a lack of confidence in their validity.) I would like now to offer a few comments on each of the arguments in turn.

‘(1) I agree with Cotta (III.9–15) that even if there is a universal belief in the existence of gods, this does not prove their existence: the belief may be mistaken. It is all very well for Lactantius to call in aid the mystics and theologians, but these too could have been mistaken; it is astonishing how much credence has been given by otherwise

intelligent and cultured people to the bogus systems of witchcraft and astrology. (2) Perhaps I might go into a little more detail than Lactantius thought necessary on Balbus's arguments from nature. Balbus began (II.4) by pointing to the sky: no one, he said, can look at the stars and deny that they are governed by a supreme intelligence. This does not seem to me to follow. No doubt the stars are very wonderful, but do we need to invent a god to explain them? The very regularity of their motions tells against this; if the stars are themselves divine, as Balbus later maintained (II.39–44), their motions would surely show signs of intelligence and not stick to a mechanical routine. Balbus also pointed to the beneficence of nature (II.13); but nature is cruel as well as beneficent. He also drew attention to the marvels of nature and extraordinary occurrences (ibid.), but how he can simultaneously argue to God from the regularity and the irregularity of nature, her beneficence and her catastrophes, is more than I can understand. In any case most of the freaks of nature have simple scientific explanations. Again, much play was made by Balbus with the supposed fitness of the world for human habitation, but why should we suppose that the world was designed for men to live in? Is it not equally reasonable to suppose that in the course of millions of years animals and men have gradually adapted themselves to the chance conditions that happen to operate on this planet? The sun may seem beneficent to man, but that is because we have adapted ourselves to sunlight; the axolotl lives perfectly happily in the dark. Nor is it true that the world is well designed for human habitation: vast areas of it are uninhabitable, and in many other parts human life is a constant struggle against an adverse climate. Again, the fact that human beings have reason is no special proof of a rational Creator. Of course if everything needs a creator, then it would be difficult to suppose that the Creator was less rational than the beings he had created; but this begs the question – do we need a universal creator at all?

‘I have gone into some of these points, Marcus Tullius, because unfortunately a good deal of Cotta's reply to Balbus will have been lost to readers of your dialogue. I would now like to say something about chance. Balbus argued that there is too much order and regularity in the world for it to have been the product of chance: if you spill a box of letters on the ground they do not form themselves into the *Annals* of Ennius (II.93). But the universe is not intelligible in the same way that human language is intelligible. It is a great riddle susceptible of many interpretations. It is like a modern abstract painting: some people looking at it would say it had been painted completely at random, others would say they see order, design and meaning in it, others again would say it shows the personality of its

designer – it is unquestionably a Jackson Pollock. Which is right? We study nature and find regularities, because that is what we are looking for, but if we want evidence of chance occurrences there is plenty of evidence to hand. We can predict eclipses, but we cannot predict sunspots, or the details of the weather, or the date when the lemmings will rush to the sea, or when or where the next earthquake will occur. Much of the course of evolution seems to have occurred for no particular reason: can anyone explain why antelopes are camouflaged but not zebras, why whales went back to the water and lost their legs, why tropical birds are more brightly coloured than those of Europe, or why in a crisis some species go extinct while others adapt themselves to new conditions? If we believe in a Creator we can say that all these things are part of his deep designs, or that they are the results of the subordinate creativity which he has delegated to his creatures, but equally we could attribute them to mere accident.

‘I need say little about argument (3) – Zeno’s syllogisms – (II.21–39), because Cotta has so well exposed their fallacies (III.20–23). I would make just one general comment. If you examine the supposed proofs of God’s existence, you will find that they all really assume what they are trying to prove. You assume, for instance, that the universe is fundamentally good and purposive, or that there must be a first cause or a necessary being. They are not really arguments from the known to the unknown. As Kant will have shown in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, we cannot argue from human categories of thought to what is beyond reason. On argument (4) – prediction of the future – I agree with Lactantius, but I would be less ready to admit the possibility of genuine prediction. Many predictions have been falsified by events; it is the lucky ones that are remembered. But even if prediction is possible, it does not follow that the future is determined, still less that it is determined by God. As regards argument (5), I agree with Lactantius that tradition in itself can be no argument for believing in God.

‘Now if the existence of gods is a matter of such uncertainty, why should people be so anxious to believe in a divine realm? It would appear from what has been said by Lactantius, as well as by Balbus and Cotta, that such belief is thought to be necessary for the sake of morality. But is this really so? Why should God be necessary as a support for moral values? Can they not stand on their own, like aesthetic values for instance? Surely we can live morally – that is, considerately, humbly, responsibly and tolerantly – without believing that any action or type of action is absolutely right? And in practice religious people behave no better than irreligious – if anything the reverse, because they justify and intensify their wickedness by religious zeal. Epicurus was absolutely right on this point, but he

ought to have had the courage of his convictions and abolished the gods altogether. As it is, they are an idle excrescence on his system, rather like the God of some twentieth-century Christians who is simply a picture of ideal morality but makes no difference to what goes on on earth.

‘Of course if God is real, then there is a problem of how erring man can be reconciled to him without being simply absorbed into the divine. I agree that Christianity provides a much better solution to this problem than Stoicism – provided one can accept the paradox of God entering into a human life. But it is a false problem, because there is no convincing reason to suppose that there is God at all.

‘Perhaps I might sum up my position by putting the following dilemma to Balbus and Lactantius. Either there is convincing evidence of God or there is not; and by convincing evidence I mean factual evidence of divine activity in the world which would be accepted by a historian or scientist. If there is such evidence, it means that God is part of the phenomenal world and therefore subject to historical or scientific investigation. But in that case he is not the infinite Creator, the timeless First Cause, the Ground of all existence, and therefore not a fit object of human devotion. If on the other hand there is no such evidence, because we believe in God first and only find the evidence afterwards, then God becomes so utterly different from everything else in the universe that he is unknowable and therefore irrelevant to ordinary life. Balbus on the whole took the former horn of the dilemma, Lactantius the latter. If I could see a third choice, I would gladly consider it.’

When Thomas had finished I said I felt there was a head-on clash between Lactantius, who argued that if you first assume the existence of God you will become convinced of his reality, and Thomas, who considered this intellectually dishonest. I must admit that on this point my sympathies were with Lactantius, for I have always held, as my writings testify, that God has implanted in men an innate conviction of his existence. Lactantius added at this point that in his view our awareness of God is as fundamental as our awareness of the physical world or of other people: the existence of these could not be convincingly proved to someone who doubted their reality. ‘Possibly so,’ answered Thomas. ‘But we are under no such necessity to believe in God as we are to believe in the physical world and in other people.’ ‘On the contrary,’ said Lactantius, ‘we are under much greater necessity, but of a different kind.’

At this point I decided that as both speakers had raised novel points which had not been before our minds at our discussion in Cotta’s house, I ought as soon as possible to bring them to a further discussion with Velleius, Balbus and Cotta, in order to bring these difficult and

important problems nearer to a solution.

LIST OF BOOKS

(Books marked * are recommended for the general reader: the others are more technical.)

I. CICERO

(a) *Cicero generally*

- D. R. SHACKLETON BAILEY: *Cicero*, Duckworth, London, 1971.
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University Press, Cambridge, 1932.
- *F. R. COWELL: *Cicero and the Roman Republic*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 4th edition, 1967.
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- E. RAWSON: *Cicero: A Portrait*, Allen Lane, London, 1975.
- *G. C. RICHARDS: *Cicero, A Study*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1935.
- SIR W. SMITH'S *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (article on Cicero by Sir William Ramsay), John Murray, 1844–9.

(b) *Cicero as Philosopher*

- T. A. DOREY: op. cit., essay by A. E. Douglas, 'Cicero the Philosopher'. *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (article on Cicero by P. H. De Lacy), Macmillan, New York, 1967.
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- *J. S. REID: *M. Tulli Ciceronis Academica*, pp. 1–26, Macmillan, London, 1885.
- W. SÜSS: *Cicero – Eine Einführung in seine philosophischen Schriften*, Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz, 1965.

II. 'THE NATURE OF THE GODS'

- B. F. HARRIS: *Cicero as an Academic – A Study of the De Natura Deorum*, University of Auckland Bulletin no. 58, Classics Series no. 2, 1961.
- M. Y. HENRY: *The Relation of Dogmatism and Scepticism in the Philosophical Treatises of Cicero*, New York, 1925.
- J. B. MAYOR: *M. Tullii Ciceronis De Natura Deorum Libri Tres*, 3 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1891.
- R. M. OGILVIE: *The Romans and their Gods*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1969.
- PAULY-WISSOWA: op. cit., pp. 1151–6.
- A. S. PEASE: *M. Tulli Ciceronis De Natura Deorum*, 2 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., U.S.A., 1955.
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III. THE RIVAL PHILOSOPHIES

- E. V. ARNOLD: *Roman Stoicism*, Cambridge University Press, 1911, reprinted Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1938.
- C. BAILEY: *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1928. (See also *Cambridge Ancient History*)
- *E. R. BEVAN: *Stoics and Sceptics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1913.
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- *A. E. TAYLOR: *Epicurus*, Constable, London, 1911.
- *W. WALLACE: *Epicureanism*, S.P.C.K., London, 1880.
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- E. ZELLER: *The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics*, translated from the German by O. J. Reichel, Longmans Green, London, 1880.

IV. 'THE NATURE OF THE GODS' IN HISTORY

- Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*: op. cit., article 'Physicotheology' by Mayrick H. Carré.
- A. S. PEASE: op. cit., pp. 52–61.
- *J. C. ROLFE: *Cicero and His Influence*, Harrap, London, 1923.
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- TH. ZIELINSKI: *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte*, third edition, Leipzig, 1912.

GLOSSARY

(All dates are B.C.)

ACADEMY A grove by the river Cephissus, on the western outskirts of Athens, sacred to the hero Academus. It was later used as a gymnasium and adorned with statues, and plantations of plane and olive. Here Plato established his school, which still existed in Cicero's day in the form of the New Academy and taught a critical scepticism which Cicero adopted as his own philosophy. (See also Introduction, pp. 47–51.)

ALBUCIUS A Roman adherent of the Epicurean school.

ALCMAEON OF CROTON A younger contemporary of Pythagoras.

ANAXAGORAS (500–428) Anaxagoras was born at Clazomenae in Ionia. At the age of twenty he emigrated to Athens, where he became the friend and teacher of Pericles. He stayed some thirty years in Athens but was accused of impiety and it was only thanks to his friend Pericles that he escaped with his life. Anaxagoras taught that the natural world was made up of an infinite number of different substances which were arranged by a supreme intelligence which was superior to and separate from the natural world. This divine Mind had created the cosmos out of chaos and prescribed its laws.

ANAXARCHUS A philosopher of the school of Democritus, who accompanied Alexander the Great on his Asian campaign (334). After the death of Alexander, Anaxarchus was shipwrecked on the island of Cyprus and executed by the Cypriot King Nicocreon for an old offence.

ANAXIMANDER (610–547) Born in Miletus, Anaximander was a natural philosopher of the Ionian school but whereas other thinkers of this school sought the origin of the world in one of the natural elements such as air or water, Anaximander thought that all natural phenomena were particular differentiations of an indeterminate abstract substance which he called 'the unlimited'.

ANAXIMENES Born in Miletus, Anaximenes flourished about the middle of the sixth century. He was a mathematician and cosmologist who taught that air was the origin of all things. By 'air' however it is probable that he meant a subtle vital aether, which permeated and quickened the whole universe, rather than the air we breathe.

ANTIOCHUS An Academic philosopher under whom Cicero studied in Athens (79). (See Introduction, p. 50.)

ANTISTHENES An Athenian philosopher of the fifth century and a disciple of Socrates, who became the founder of the school of philosophy known as 'The Cynics'. He rejected all speculative and metaphysical systems as useless and was a strong opponent of Plato. He taught that virtue in conduct is the only good and it was from his teaching that the doctrines of Stoicism were later born.

APOLLODORUS A minor Stoic philosopher.

ARCESILAS Founder of the Second or Middle Academy at Athens (c. 315–240). (See Introduction, [p. 48.](#))

ARISTIPPUS (fl. c. 370) A native of Cyrene, and the founder of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, which made pleasure the highest good. He was for a time a disciple of Socrates at Athens and also spent part of his life in Sicily at the court of the tyrant Dionysius. He seems however to have returned to Cyrene in his old age.

ARISTO A Stoic philosopher who flourished c. 260. He was a native of Chios and a pupil of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school.

ARISTOTLE A pupil of Plato, Aristotle founded his own school of philosophy at Athens – the Lyceum. Aristotle wrote and lectured upon almost every subject of knowledge known to his age and many of his works survived to guide (and sometimes to mislead) his successors in antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. Much of his work, e.g. on logic and on literary criticism, has kept its influence and its validity until the present day.

CARNEADES Born in Cyrene c. 213, Carneades first studied the Stoic philosophy as a pupil of Diogenes, but later abandoned it and founded the New Academy at Athens, in opposition to the Stoics. In 155 he was sent by the Athenians to Rome as a special envoy to secure the remission of a fine which had been imposed on them. There he is said to have given two lectures on 'justice' on successive days, using the second lecture to demolish all the arguments of the first. Such logical ingenuity confirmed the more conservative Romans in their suspicions of the subversive tendencies of Greek philosophy and led Cato the Censor to move a resolution in the Senate which resulted in Carneades being asked to leave. Carneades returned to Athens to resume his work as head of the New Academy and died there at the age of ninety. A few anecdotes survive, such as that when once defeated in public argument he remarked: 'I ought to ask Diogenes for my money back.' (See also [Introduction, p. 49.](#))

CHRYSIPPUS A Stoic philosopher (born 280) and a pupil of Cleanthes, in succession to whom he held the headship of the Stoa from c. 233 until his death c. 206. (See [Introduction, pp. 41–5.](#))

CLBANTHES A Stoic philosopher (born c. 300) who was a pupil of Zeno. He succeeded Zeno as head of the school in 263 and died about

220 at the age of 80, apparently by a voluntary suicide. His 'Hymn to Zeus' has survived. (See also [Introduction, p. 41.](#))

CORUNCIANUS, **TITUS** Consul in 280 and the first plebeian to be appointed pontifex maximus. He was also a teacher of law.

DEMOCRITUS Democritus was born at Abdera in Thrace c. 460. He was a great traveller, a man of parts, and highly honoured by his fellow-citizens. He refused however any political office. He was known in Greek tradition as 'The Laughing Philosopher', in contrast to the pessimistic Heraclitus. Democritus was a polymath whose studies embraced the natural sciences, mathematics, grammar and music as well as metaphysics. He developed the atomic theory adumbrated by Leucippus and was the first to distinguish between the objective qualities of matter and those such as colour, taste, smell etc. which are merely the effects produced upon our own consciousness through the medium of the sense-organs. In his own words:

The sweet exists only in form, the bitter in form, the cold in form, colour in form: but these are merely the effects of the sole reality of atoms and the void.

DIAGORAS OF MELOS A disciple of Democritus, and an uncompromising atheist. He was accused of impiety when teaching at Athens in 411 and fled to Pallene and afterwards to Corinth, where he died.

DIODOTUS A Stoic philosopher and a teacher of Cicero, in whose house he died in 59. (See [Introduction, p. 9.](#))

DIOGENES OF APOLLONIA A Cretan philosopher, pupil of Anaximenes.

DIOGENES OF BABYLON A Stoic philosopher of the second century and the fourth principal of the Stoic school.

DIOGENES THE CYNIC Born at Sinope in Pontus (c. 412) he was extravagant as a youth but later became noted for his austerity and biting wit. He practised a philosophy of absolute independence of other people and of worldly goods. There is a story that when Alexander the Great asked what he could do for him, he replied: 'Please stand out of the sun.'

EMPEDOCLES A famous Sicilian philosopher of the middle of the fifth century. A learned, eloquent and imposing figure, he became a legend in his own time, and was revered not only as a sage but also as a healer and magician. There was a tradition that he died by throwing himself into the crater of Mount Etna, in order that his suicide might be taken for an apotheosis. Empedocles believed that the natural world was built up from four elements – fire, air, earth and water. These elements were brought into order and harmony by the power of

Love: but this harmony and order was perturbed and hindered by the power of Hate. Love and Hate he saw as the two great moving forces in the world, the one positive and creative, the other negative and evil.

EPICURUS Epicurus was born in 342 on the island of Samos. In 306 he made his home in Athens. There he purchased a garden in which he established his own school of philosophy. Epicurus taught that the aim of life was the search for happiness, by which he meant not merely the pursuit of pleasure but rather the cultivation of the peace of mind to be found in a wise and moderate way of life. He was not an ascetic, but neither was he the sensualist which his opponents made him out to be. In his ethics he differed from the Stoics, inasmuch as the Stoics taught that virtue should be practised as an end in itself, whereas Epicurus held that virtue was valuable only as a means to happiness. In his physics Epicurus adopted the atomic theory of Democritus. The spirit of Epicurus may be seen from the inscription placed above the entrance to the Garden: The host and keeper of this place, where you will find the pleasure of the highest good, will offer you freely cakes of barley and fresh spring water. This garden will not tease your appetite with the dainties of art but satisfy it with the bounty of nature. Will you not be a happy guest?

(See also Introduction, [pp. 36–40.](#))

EUHEMERUS (*fl.* c. 316) A Sicilian and the author of *The Sacred History* in which he attempted to show that the ancient myths reflected actual historical events and that the gods were originally heroic men who had been deified after death by those whom they had benefited.

HERACLIDES PONTICUS A Greek philosopher in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle.

HERMARCHUS A rhetorician of Mitilene who became a disciple of Epicurus and later his successor (c. 270).

HIERON Tyrant of Syracuse (478–467), Hieron was a patron of literature, and Pindar, Aeschylus and Simonides were all guests at his court.

LAELIUS, CAIUS (born c. 186) A friend of Scipio Africanus the Younger, well known for his love of literature and philosophy. He appears as a speaker in several of Cicero's philosophical dialogues.

LEONTIUM A feminine disciple of Epicurus. Cotta's abusive reference to her is probably motivated only by Roman prejudice against her as a 'bluestocking'.

LUCILIUS C. Lucilius, a Roman satiric poet, was born in 148 B.C. and

died at Naples in 103 B.C. He was the originator of the type of satiric verse which was later developed by Horace and Juvenal.

METRODORUS (d. 277) The most distinguished of the pupils of Epicurus.

NAUSIPHANES A teacher of Epicurus.

PANAETIUS A Stoic philosopher from Rhodes, who lived for some time at Rome. He became head of the Stoic school at Athens and died c. 111. (See [Introduction](#), p. 46.)

PARMENIDES Born at Elea in Italy, Parmenides sharpened the distinction between appearance and reality which had already been drawn by Xenophanes (who may have been his teacher), and between truth and opinion, between the ideas of reason and the impressions received through the senses. He taught that all knowledge derived from the evidence of the senses is subjective and illusory, and that only reason can give absolute truth. He conceived the ultimate reality as one, eternal and changeless, a perfect sphere. His was an absolute faith in pure reason as a guide to truth, and the only guide:

You must not let everyday experience in its variety force you to permit the eye, which does not see, or the ear, which is full of noise, or the tongue, to rule your thought. Through reason only you must judge the truth.

PERIPATETICS The followers of Aristotle. (See [Introduction](#), p. 51.)

PERSAEUS A Stoic philosopher.

PHAEDRUS A head of the Epicurean school (d. 70).

PHILO An Academic philosopher, under whom Cicero studied when he came to Rome in 88. (See [Introduction](#), pp. 8 and 50.)

PISO, MARCUS A follower of the Peripatetic school. Consul in 61.

PLATO (428–347) From the age of twenty a follower and friend of Socrates. After his death Plato left Athens and visited Egypt, Sicily and Italy. On his return he taught in the Academy and became the founder of the Academic School. Plato wrote many works in dialogue form which have survived. The theological and cosmological dialogue *Timaeus* is the most relevant to the questions considered in the present work.

POSIDONIUS A Stoic philosopher who studied in Athens and later taught in Rhodes and at Rome, where he died c. 51. A teacher and a friend of Cicero. (See [Introduction](#), p. 46.)

PRODICUS OF CEOS (born 470) A sophist who frequently visited Athens.

PROTAGORAS Born at Abdera in Thrace c. 480, Protagoras was one of the earliest of the Greek ‘sophists’. The term ‘sophist’ originally meant

‘a wise man’. Only later did it come to mean a professional teacher, and in Athens was then applied particularly to those who professed to make other men wise. The extravagant pretensions and cynical views of some of the sophists brought the term into increasing disrepute until it acquired its modern meaning of a quibbler or a cheat. The earlier sophists however were more akin to wandering professors of the arts and sciences, who went from city to city to lecture and teach. Protagoras, whose teaching was mainly practical, was accused of impiety in his old age, because he had published a work *On the Gods* which began with the statement: ‘I cannot say for certain whether the gods exist or not.’ In other words, he was an agnostic. The tradition is that he was expelled from Athens and his book was burnt.

PYTHAGORAS A Greek philosopher of the latter part of the sixth century, whose teachings blended mathematics with mysticism. A native of Samos, he is said to have travelled widely in Egypt and the East in search of esoteric knowledge. Later he settled at Croton in Italy, where he founded a brotherhood of his disciples, bound by sacred vows to the master and to each other. But the populace rose against them and burnt the building where they met. One tradition says that Pythagoras himself perished in the fire: another that he fled to Tarentum, and afterwards to Metapontum, where he committed suicide. Pythagoras left no written works, and the true nature of his teachings is uncertain. He seems to have taught that number and mathematical relations were the origin and basis of all things. He believed in reincarnation, and pretended to powers of divination and prophecy. He preached a new way of life inspired by the love of wisdom for its own sake and the study of the mathematical harmonies of the natural world.

SCAEVOLA, PUBLIUS Pontifex maximus in 131. He was a recognized authority on religious law.

SCIPIO, PUBLIUS One of the greatest of Roman generals and architect of Rome’s final victory over Carthage in the third Punic War. Scipio was a friend of many Greek and Roman writers, including the Stoic philosopher Panaetius. His friendship with Gaius Laelius is celebrated in Cicero’s dialogue *On Friendship*.

SIMONIDES A famous Greek lyric poet. Born in Ceos in 556 B.C. he emigrated to Athens (where he defeated Aeschylus in a poetic contest in 489) and in his old age was invited to Sicily by Hieron. One of his sayings was: ‘The city is the teacher of the man.’

SOCRATES (469–399) Although Socrates is mentioned by Cicero as the originator of the Academic method of philosophy, he was in no way an ‘academic’ philosopher in the modern sense. He founded no school, he gave no lectures. He sought only, through question and

discussion with any who would talk with him, to awaken in them an impulse to examine their own beliefs and way of life in the light of reason, and to distinguish between true knowledge and irrational conceit and bigotry. This constant probing of conventional morality, which he pursued in the streets, the market-place and the workshops of Athens, aroused political animosities against him which finally led to his trial and conviction, on charges of impiety and subversion of youth. Although his friends could have arranged his escape, he preferred to submit himself to the laws of his city and died with calm composure in the presence of his friends. His character and way of life are preserved for us in the dialogues of Plato and the memoirs of Xenophon.

SPEUSIPPUS A nephew of Plato, who succeeded him as head of the Academy from 347 to 339.

STOICISM The school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium. The Stoics derived their name from a painted colonnade (Stoa) at Athens where Zeno lectured. Their philosophy was in essence a system of ethics and the practice of it was the exercise of virtue. The determining concept of their system was duty, as that of the Epicureans was pleasure. The object of their philosophy was practical wisdom rather than theoretical knowledge, a way of life rather than a metaphysical system. Its aim was to bring the life of man into harmony with cosmic law. (See Introduction, [pp. 40–47.](#))

STRATO Strato succeeded Theophrastus as head of the Peripatetic school in 288. His main interest was in natural science. He was a tutor of Ptolemy Philadelphus. (See Introduction, [p. 51.](#))

THALES One of the founders of Greek philosophy and mathematics, Thales was born at Miletus c. 636 and died c. 546 at the age of ninety. He was reckoned as one of the Seven Sages, and is said to have predicted an eclipse of the sun. Thales taught that water is the origin of all things, i.e. that water is the primeval element out of which everything arises and into which everything resolves itself again. He is also credited with the saying that 'All things are full of gods'. By this he probably meant that the gods themselves were a part of physical nature and a product of the natural process.

THEODORUS A philosopher of the Cyrenaic school who was banished from Athens for his atheism and went to Alexandria, where he entered the service of the Egyptian King, Ptolemy I (323–285).

THEOPHRASTUS Born in Lesbos, Theophrastus studied philosophy at Athens under Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle named him his successor as head of the Lyceum. He was president of the Academy for about thirty-five years and died in 287, lamenting the shortness of human life 'which ended just as insight into its problems was beginning'. (See

[Introduction, p. 51.](#))

TIMOCRATES A pupil of Epicurus.

XENOCRATES Xenocrates (396–314) was born in Chalcedon. As a youth he went with Plato to Syracuse and after Plato's death went with Aristotle to the court of Hermias, the tyrant of Atarneus. He later returned to Athens, became president of the Academy and held that post for twenty-five years. The writings of Xenocrates were highly valued by his contemporaries, but nothing of them has survived.

XENOPHANES A philosopher and poet of the latter half of the sixth century. He was born in Colophon, but left his native city as a young man and must have lived for some time at Elea in Italy, as he was usually regarded as the founder of the Eleatic school of metaphysics, which taught that all change was merely appearance, and that the essential reality was one and unchanging. Xenophanes seems to have identified this ultimate reality with the great vault of the heavens, but from the fragments of his works which remain it is not possible to interpret his doctrine with any certainty. It may not have remained the same throughout his long life, as he was always conscious of the doubts which beset all human speculations about ultimate truth.

XENOPHON (c. 444–350) Xenophon is better known as an Athenian general than as a philosopher but as a young man he was a pupil of Socrates and he was the author of a book – the *Memorabilia* – in which he sought to clear the memory of his old master of the charge of impiety and corruption of youth. The vivid picture of Socrates given in this work may well come closer to the man as he was in life than does the more idealized picture painted in the dialogues of Plato and certainly brings out more forcibly the practical side of his philosophy.

ZENO OF CITIUM The founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. (See [Introduction, pp. 40–47.](#))

ZENO OF SIDON An Epicurean philosopher and a contemporary of Cicero, who heard him lecture at Athens.

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**Brutus* 89.306.

**Brutus* 91.314.

†*Life of Cicero* 3.6.

‡Quintilian, *Instruction in Oratory* XII, 1. 17.

§*Academics* II, 35. 113.

**Laws* II, 14. 36.

†*Hortensius*, Fragment 18.

‡*Life of Cicero* 2.4.

**Academica*, p. 8.

†*The Nature of the Gods* I.6.

‡*Letters to Atticus* I.20.7.

§ *To Atticus* IV. 10.

*e.g. *On the State* I.4.7. *Tusculan Disputations* V.2.5.

**Life of Cicero* 41.4.

*To Atticus XII.52.3.

†On Duties I.6; cf. *Ends of Good and Evil* I.6.

*Vol. III, p. xviii.

†Vol. I, p. 51.

*Not to be confused with Zeno of Elea, the fifth-century propounder of paradoxes such as that of Achilles and the tortoise.

* *Objection to Heretics 7.*

**Against the Nations* III.7.

**Divine Institutions* I.17.

†*City of God* X.3; XII.24.

*Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 90, cols. 78,1053 ff.

**Philosophical Dictionary*, under Cicero.

*For comment on the three reasons given by Cicero, see [Introduction](#), pp. 17–20.

†The ‘great misfortune’ to which Cicero refers was the death of his daughter Tullia in 45. (See [Introduction](#), p. 19.)

*In the *Academica*.

†The Academic theory of knowledge recognized only ‘reasonable probabilities’, whereas the theory of the Stoics postulated an instinctive criterion of certainty which compelled assent to any true perception. See [Introduction](#), p. 43 and p. 49.)

‡ *The Young Companions* was a Latin version by Caecilius Statius of a Greek comedy by Menander.

*Cicero had been elected a member of the College of Augurs in 53. (See Introduction, [p. 14.](#))

*Epicurus taught that the gods dwelt in the empty spaces which lay between the innumerable material worlds. (See [Introduction](#), p. 38.)

†The ‘archetypal shapes’ of Plato were the pyramid, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron and eicosihedron, which he thought to be the shapes respectively of the particles of fire, earth, air, aether and water.

*The text here is imperfect and some words seem to have been lost The translation adopts the reading '*qualia vero alia sint*'.

*“To discover the maker and father of this universe is indeed a hard task, and having found him it would be impossible to tell everyone about him.’ (Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by H. D. P. Lee, Penguin Classics, 28 c.)

*This seems to be a somewhat confused reference to Aristotle's theory of planetary motion, which involved a concept of 'counter-rotation', which had however no application to the universe as a whole.

*The Roman poet Lucretius in *On the Nature of the Universe* refers to Epicurus as a god. 'He was a god – a god indeed... who first discovered that rule of life that now is called *philosophy*' (*De Rerum Natura*, v. 8, translated by R. E. Latham, Penguin Classics).

*Reading '*a deis*' for '*ad deos*'. The concept of the flow of images is obscure but seems in modern terms analogous to the succession of static images projected on a cinema screen to give a moving picture.

*The reference is to the proverbial '*deus ex machina*' (the god from the machine) who often appeared at the end of Greek tragedies to cut the Gordian knot of a plot which could not be otherwise resolved.

*‘Son of Neptune’: a slang phrase meaning ‘a tough customer’.

*Reading 'oratio' for 'ratio'.

†Apollonius Rhodius pictured Triton as follows: 'The body of the god, front and back, from the crown of his head to his waist and belly was exactly like that of the other immortals; but from the hips down he was a monster of the deep, with two long tails, each ending in a pair of curved flukes shaped like the crescent moon' (*The Voyage of Argo*, iv. 1610, translated by E. V. Rieu, Penguin Classics).

*A great Athenian sculptor (fl. 444–400); the most famous of the pupils of Phidias.

*Cotta means that the theoretically calculated motions of the sun, moon and planets do not correspond to their apparent motions as we see them.

*This statement derives from Aristotle (*Generation of Animals* III.9, *History of Animals* V.19).

*Reading '*contionans*' and '*pervenerim*' for '*contionantem*' and '*per-venerint*'.

*Reading '*deorum*' for '*rerum*'.

*Diogenes Laertius (X.29) mentions a treatise of Epicurus *On the Divine*.

*The origin of this verse is not known.

†This may be a quotation from the *Philoctetes* of Accius.

‡Democritus was born in Abdera in Thrace, a town whose citizens were proverbial for their stupidity.

*In the Latin Cicero derives the one word from the other: '*amicitia*' (friendship) from '*amor*' (love).

*This does not tally with the story as told by Cicero elsewhere. Attus had vowed to the Lares the biggest bunch of grapes in his vineyard if they helped him to find a pig which had strayed. When he had recovered it, he *then* discovered by the use of his augur's staff where to find the best bunch of grapes.

*The auspices ceased to be valid once the augur had recrossed the city boundary.

*Cicero gives the Greek and Latin terms for ‘comet’, both of which mean literally ‘long-haired stars’.

†The year 129, in which Scipio Africanus was found murdered in his bed.

*Or perhaps 'There is a fiery power which....' (reading '*igneae*' for '*igitur*').

*The reference is to *Timaeus* 89. 'Among movements, the best is that we produce in ourselves of ourselves – for it is most nearly akin to the movement of thought and of the universe; next is movement produced in us by another: worst of all is the movement caused by outside agents in parts of the body while the body itself remains passive and inert.' (Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by H. D. P. Lee, Penguin Classics.)

*This may be a reference to something in Aristotle's lost dialogue *De Philosophia*.

*Probably another reference to something in the *De Philosophia*.

*Ancient geometers drew their diagrams in dust.

†That is, the fixed stars and the planets.

*Cf. *Timaeus* 39.

*Reading '*datum*' for '*natum*'.

*Uranus.

*Cicero cites here a Latin version of Euripides fr. 386.

†That is, Hera.

*Diana from *dies* (day).

*Cicero also cites here analogous derivations: 'elegant' from '*eligere*' (to choose), 'diligent' from '*diligere*' (to call for), '*intelligent*' from '*intellegere*' (to understand), saying that all these words contain the same sense of 'choosing' (*legere*) that is present in 'religious'. The more probable derivation of '*religio*' however is from '*religare*' (to bind).

†The text reads '... you said yesterday'. It appears that the work was originally planned to comprise three discussions on three separate days. The retention here of the word 'yesterday' is one of the indications that the work was never finally revised. Cf. [notes on pp. 200](#) and [235](#).

*Accius (or Attius) was a Roman poet (born 170). His dramatic works were imitations of the Greek. The lines quoted come from his *Medea*.

*Cicero adds the note: 'Air (*aer*) is a Greek word but is now an accepted usage with us and passes current as Latin.'

*Cicero includes here the following digressive note: ‘The word “aether” we may also borrow, and use it like “air” as a Latin word, although Pacuvius must needs translate it:

I speak of that which we call heaven and the Greeks aether.

and this when the person speaking is a Greek! It is true that he is speaking in Latin, if we are not to imagine him as talking Greek, for elsewhere Pacuvius makes him say: “I am a Grecian born, my speech reveals it.” ’ Pacuvius (c. 220–130) was a Roman painter and poet, who adapted tragedies from the Greek.

*From Aristotle's lost work *De Philosophia*.

*Aratus (fl. 270) was a Cilician who spent his later life at the court of Antigonus Gonatas, King of Macedonia. He was the author of an astronomical poem, *Phaenomena*, a very popular work which survived intact. If the translator's couplets seem a little quaint, the same may perhaps be said of Cicero's hexameters!

*These Greek names mean respectively ‘the dog’s tail’ and ‘the spiral’.

*Cicero includes here the following note: ‘In our own language we call the Hyades “the Sucking-Pigs”, which is a mistranslation. The Greek name is derived from the Greek verb “to rain” and has nothing to do with pigs.’

*See [page 141](#).

*Aristotle, *History of Animals* IX.10.

*The '*pupa*' (Greek '*kore*') was so called because it reflected a small doll-like image of a person looking into it.

*Another quotation from Cicero's translation of Aratus's *Phaenomena*.

*Gaius Laelius in 143 opposed and defeated a proposal to replace the co-optio of augurs by a system of election by popular vote.

*e.g. the sun, moon and stars.

†cf. [Book II](#), p. 125.

*cf. [Book II, p. 126](#).

†cf. [Book II, p. 128](#).

‡ cf. [Book II, p. 127](#).

*cf. [Book II](#), p. 125.

*The text includes here the words ‘the day before yesterday’, another indication that the work was originally planned as a discussion extending over three separate days. Cf. note on p. 153.

*‘*Callidus*’ (clever) is derived, as Cicero here suggests, from ‘*callum*’ (hard skin), and so acquires the meanings ‘practised’, ‘experienced’, ‘expert’.

†The argument here promised does not appear in the text as we have it.

*Among the fragments of the teachings of Heraclitus which survive is the statement that 'All things are an exchange for Fire, and Fire for all things: as goods for gold, and gold for goods.' And again: 'The universe is not the creation of a man or of a god, but it was and is and always will be ever-living Fire... .'

†Heraclitus was called 'The Dark Philosopher' because of the perhaps deliberately obscure and oracular nature of his teachings.

*In the Latin the argument here rests also on the kinship of the words '*anima*' (air or vital principle), '*animus*' (soul or spiritual principle) and '*animal*' (a living creature).

*Dagon, a fish with a woman's head, was worshipped at Ascalon.

**Odyssey* XI.600 ff: 'Next after him (Sisyphus) I observed the mighty Heracles (– his wraith, that is to say, since he himself banquets at ease with the immortal gods and has for consort Hebe of the slim ankles, the daughter of almighty Zeus and golden-sandalled Hera.)' The bracketed words however were rejected by the Alexandrian critic Aristarchus as spurious and inconsistent with the *Iliad*, in which Heracles is said to have been slain by the wrath of Hera, and Hebe is referred to as a virgin. (Translated by E. V. Rieu, Penguin Classics.)

*See note on [p. 194](#).

*The speaker interprets '*lucus Furinale*' (the grove of Furina) as meaning a grove sacred to the Furies, who were the Roman equivalent of the Greek Eumenides.

†This ancient Latin city was the centre of a cult of Venus.

*This Latin name for the shrine is otherwise unknown and the text may be at fault.

*The Lipari Islands, once called 'Volcaniae', the Isles of Vulcan.

*Reading '*accepta*' for '*concepta*'.

*See pp. 148 ff.

*These verses are from the *Medea* of Ennius.

†Another quotation from Ennius.

*Also from the *Medea* of Ennius.

†The origin of these verses is uncertain: possibly from the *Medea* of Accius. See note on [p. 159](#).

*This and the two following quotations are from the *Atreus* of Accius.

*By Terence.

*See note on [p. 74](#).

*Tolosa joined in a revolt of the Gauls and was sacked by Q. Servi-lius Caepio (106). The temples had contained much treasure in gold and Caepio was punished for sacrilege on his return to Rome.

†A law to prevent the exploitation of young men by moneylenders.

*The opening lines of the *Medea* of Ennius, a Latin translation from the Greek of Euripides.

*These verses are from the *Telamon* of Ennius.

*See [p. 228](#).

* A tithe of the spoils of war or of treasure-trove was regarded as due to Hercules as 'the god of treasure'.

*These verses are probably from the *Thyestes* of Accius.

†Critolaus was a general of the Achaean League: as a result of his defeat by the Romans in 147 Corinth was captured and destroyed. Hasdrubal led a Carthaginian expedition against Masinissa, King of Numidia. As the king was an ally of Rome, this gave the Romans a pretext for the Third Punic War, which led to the destruction of Carthage (146).

*This somewhat abrupt conclusion to the work is another indication that it was never finished in the form in which it was originally conceived. See notes on [pp. 153](#) and [200](#); and [Introduction](#), p. 33.

*See Introduction, [p. 53](#).

**City of God* V.10 and *De Lib. Arb.* iii, 3 and 4.

†Cf. Pirque Aboth III. 24: 'Everything is foreknown [i.e. by God], but freedom of choice is given.'

*Cf. Ang. Conf. XI. xii. 14.